The scenic presentation of the Electra-myth in Greek, German and American Drama.

Alexandra Sakellari

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ABSTRACT

The present study is a comparative analysis of six theatrical plays - three ancient and three modern - on the Electra-myth. The plays which are discussed are Aischylos' *Choephoroi* (the second part of his trilogy *Oresteia*), Sophocles' *Electra*, Euripides' *Electra*, Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Elektra*, Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*, and Gerhart Hauptmann's *Elektra* (the third part of his *Atriden-Tetralogie*).

The first part of the study is an outline of the historical, cultural and philosophical background of the plays and highlights the different sources of influence of the six writers. The focal point of the research, however, is the examination of the scenic presentation of the plays, a subject which has attracted little attention in other studies which have concentrated on the same myth in the past.

The concluding part of the study is an attempt to explain the choice of stage-setting, lighting, costumes and other scenic elements of each play in connection with the different factors which have had an impact on the dramatic development of the six authors. It also became evident that all the authors attached considerable importance to the scenic presentation of their dramas, regarding it as a vital dramatic component and not as a mere theatrical device; it served as a means of non-verbal expression and thus enabled the dramatists to communicate their ideas to their audience.

Στους γονεις μου

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DECLARATION

This is to certify that the work contained in this thesis is my own, except where acknowledged and stated in the text, and that no portion of the work referred to in this thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification at this or any other university or institution of learning.

Signed: 

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PREFACE

Although the spelling of Greek names in English has been the subject of extended discourse for several years, researchers have not agreed on a standard form, as some seem to favour the Latin variation, while others prefer an accurate transliteration of the original Greek names. The latter method is also the one used in this study. Hence, Aischylos is used instead of Aeschylus and Aigisthos instead of Aegisthus, unless quoted from a text in which that latter form is used. However, to avoid confusion with the German texts, when referring to characters in the Greek texts, I thought it was preferable to spell some names with a *c* and not with a *k*, although that implied a deviation from the above mentioned mode. Sophocles, Electra, Clytemnestra are therefore spelt with a *c* in English and with a *k* in German (Sophokles, Elektra, Klytämnestra). Likewise, the forms Iphigeneia and Orestes are used, unless they are characters in German texts, where they appear as Iphigenie and Orest. Naturally, if these names are included in quotations from secondary sources, the names are quoted as they appear in the text.

A further convention employed in this study is the use of italics in passages quoted from the six Electra-plays. This technique was devised as a way to accentuate the importance of the six plays, as their analysis is the core of this research, and also to provide visual variety to the reader who is asked to read through long pages.

Finally, as the second part of the dissertation focuses on the scenic presentation of the six plays and therefore forms one thematic section, the footnotes run consecutively through all the chapters.

INTRODUCTION

The present study has been inspired by the vast number of adaptations of the Electra-myth throughout the centuries. The legend of Electra, the devoted daughter whose only goal in life was to avenge her father's cruel homicide on his murderers - her mother Clytemnestra and the latter's paramour - and who succeeded in doing so with the aid of her brother Orestes, has fascinated many writers from antiquity to the present day and provided them with a literary subject. Nevertheless, Electra as a dramatic figure has been neglected in comparison to other mythological characters who have attracted more interest. From the family of the Atrides, Electra's younger sister Iphigeneia has been a greater favourite among dramatists. Goethe, influenced by the refined image of Greece created by his era, chose the legend of Iphigeneia as the subject of his drama. The innocent girl who suffers in exile for a crime committed by her father is a more attractive character than Electra, who is obsessed with the idea of revenge and has no inhibitions about committing a crime as repulsive as matricide.[1]

Electra is first mentioned in Homer's *Iliad*, where she is referred to as Laodike. However, the first dramatist to treat Electra as a main character was Aischylos in his *Choephoroi*, though there she plays a relatively minor part compared to the hero Orestes. By contrast, Sophocles' treatment of the same myth is a tribute to the personality of Electra. Orestes is only an instrument in her hands, she is the one who conceives the plan, and provides psychological support to her brother. For his part, Euripides presents a completely different image of Electra; in his homonymous tragedy, Electra is a weak woman, living in humiliation and driven to matricide out of jealousy.

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[1] E. M. Butler notes that 'Goethe's slow-moving, statuesque and highly ethical' *Iphigenie* was the supreme expression of what eighteenth century Germany most valued in its idealistic notion of Greece. See E. M. Butler, 'Hofmannsthal's *Elektra*: A Graeco-Freudian Myth', *Journal of the Warburg Institute*, 2 (1938), 164-75, (p. 164).

Many writers have followed the example of the three Greek tragedians and written dramas, novels and operatic libretti on the myth of Electra. The first known re-introduction of the theme is Joost van den Vondel's Dutch translation of Sophocles' *Electra* in 1639, followed by P.J. de Crébillon's adaptation with the title *Electre* in 1719. The fact that the Electra-myth had not been a popular dramatic subject before the seventeenth century may be attributed to the peculiarity of its topic. As matricide is a deed condemned by the Christian religion, any adaptation of the myth would have been unthinkable during the Middle Ages. Electra's desire for revenge would certainly make her a witch, and a play focusing on her personality would almost certainly have cost its author his life. Even during the Renaissance, when Greek antiquity became the subject of renewed attention, obsession as a quality in a woman and matricide as a deed were blatantly opposed to the sophisticated image of Greece which artists and writers were trying to recreate. As the following list shows, the Electra-myth first drew the attention of writers in the eighteenth century. It was taken up again by writers in the later nineteenth century and in the twentieth century, amongst them some who were not famous for their dramatic work.

Plays:

J.B. Longepierre: *Electre* (1719)

J.J. Bodmer: *Elektra oder Die gerechte Übeltat* (1760)

W. Gotter: *Orest und Elektra* (1772)

W.H. Dalberg: *Elektra* (1780)

G. Arrivabene: *Elektra* (1795)

H. Allmers: *Elektra* (1872)

B. Pérez Galdós: *Elektra* (1901)

H. von Hofmannsthal: *Elektra* (1904)

A. Suarès: *La tragédie d' Electre et d' Oreste* (1905)

E. O'Neill: *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931)

J. Giraudoux: *Electre* (1937)

J.P. Sartre: *Les Mouches* (1943)

G. Hauptmann: *Elektra* (1944)

Novels:

F. Hirschfield: *Elektra* (1923)

R. Jeffers: *The Tower beyond Tragedy* (1924)

H. Treece: *Electra* (1963)

C. Alós: *Os habla Electra* (1975)

Operas:

C. Cannabich: *Elektra* (1781) (text: Dalberg)

J.B. Lemoyne: *Electre* (1782) (text: Guillard)

F.G. Gossec: *Electre* (1782) (text: Roquefort)

R. Strauss: *Elektra* (1909) (text: Hofmannsthal)

W.H. Damrosch: *Elektra* (1917) (text: Sophocles)

A. Diepenbrock: *Elektra* (1919-20) (text: Sophocles)

H. Pousseur: *Electre* (1961) (text: P.Rhallys after Sophocles)

Ballet:

G. Meyers: *Elektra* (1898)

Film:

M. Kakoyannis: *Electra* (1962)

The little known and hitherto unperformed tragedy *I Ilektra tis Antistasis* (Electra of the Resistance)[2] by Tasos Mihalakeas bears in its title the name of the heroine although outwardly it is unrelated to the classic theme. Nevertheless, the name Electra

[2] Tasos Mihalakeas, *I Ilektra tis Antistasis* (Athens: Kapikos, 1979)

seems to have such a dramatic gravity that the modern dramatist chose it for his heroine. The character of Electra, although it is certainly not attractive, may be described as challenging for the dramatist, as it requires him to present the personality of an obsessed and psychotic woman in such a way that the audience's sympathy for her will be aroused. Moreover, the theme of revenge is woven into every human society, as it is a component of human nature, and is therefore adaptable to every historical and cultural framework in which the dramatist may wish to set his play.

The question arises why of all the literary treatments of the theme only six are discussed in this study. Aischylos' *Choephoroi*, Sophocles' *Electra* and Euripides' *Electra* were chosen because the fortunate coincidence that three ancient Greek tragedies on the same myth have survived makes it possible to observe the development and change in Greek philosophical thought, theology and everyday life. Yet these three dramas show a continuity if seen as a group, and portray accurately the actuality of the Greece of their time. The character of Electra evolves from the obedient, religious, passive woman to the strong determined heroine and finally turns into a mean, powerless creature. This evolution reflects the transformation of the Athenian citizen during the fifth century B.C.

Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Elektra* became a subject of this research because it is the most famous treatment of the Electra-myth in German, and because, written in 1903, it can be considered as a representative of the intellectually rich period of the *fin de siècle*. It is also significant that its author lived in Vienna and was influenced by the radical philosophical and psycho-analytical theories circulating there at the time. Hence *Elektra* as a dramatic work offers valuable information about the intellectual character of the Viennese *Jahrhundertwende*. But here my primary purpose is to establish how Hofmannsthal blended elements of his own classical education with the main features and tendencies of his era and included them in a tragedy, where his interest was concentrated on the scenic presentation of the Electra-myth.

I decided to include Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* in my comparative study as I regarded it a challenge to assess how a classical theme can be treated outside Europe in a country with no long literary and theatrical tradition. In the course of my research it became obvious that O'Neill's unusual and intriguing personality was the soul of the trilogy. The only way, therefore, to understand and interpret *Mourning Becomes Electra* correctly was by becoming familiar with the individuality of its author. Only after reading his personal diaries and correspondence held at Yale University did I become able to discern clearly that the trilogy, apart from being a blend of all the factors which had influenced O'Neill (Nietzsche's philosophy and Strindberg's dramas in particular), was primarily an expression of his own ego, without at the same time being a strictly autobiographical work. Furthermore, O'Neill's acquaintance since his childhood with the commercial light theatre of the time made him look for something more profound in playwriting. He was led via Strindberg to the ancient Greek theatre, the religious character of which he attempted to recreate in his own dramas.

Although O'Neill is a distinguished playwright, his work has sometimes been regarded with scepticism as the product of a country aping the European intellectual tradition without having anything significant to contribute to it. His plays have been characterized as pseudo-tragic and melodramatic, as unworthy imitations. This was possibly because O'Neill had the honesty to acknowledge that he had been influenced by other writers (e.g. Aischylos, Nietzsche and Strindberg) and also by the widespread prejudice that America is so strongly commerce-oriented that it cannot produce anything of real value. However, the consideration which O'Neill showed for his audience confirms his stature as a playwright. An example of that is the fact that he took great pains to set his *Mourning Becomes Electra* in a historical-cultural framework familiar to his audience, as that would make the trilogy more easily comprehensible. Furthermore, the fact that he placed himself in the position of all the characters he created, and went

through their suffering, reveals his anxiety to present realistic characters with whom his audience could identify. If O'Neill did indeed imitate something, it was real life.

Finally, the fact that Gerhart Hauptmann's *Elektra*, the third play of his *Atriden-Tetralogie* but the last of his life, was written at the end of the Second World War impelled me to incorporate it in my research: the strong impact the War and Germany's catastrophe had on the writer is clearly manifested in this one-act play. Moreover, the fact that Hauptmann, who held a deep affection for his country, chose this particular myth in order to convey his mourning for its destruction but at the same time his optimism for its future, supported my view that the Electra-myth is a dramatic theme with an outstanding expressive capacity.

As one would expect, the amount of secondary literature both on the work of the six playwrights and on the Electra-myth is considerable. I decided to focus on the scenic presentation of the plays mainly because the vast majority of the secondary literature about them concentrates on the analysis of the written text, the personality of the characters, and the sources of influence on the writers, devoting only meagre attention to their stage-settings and the various visual and non-verbal effects explicit or implicit in their texts. As all the six plays discussed in this thesis were written not to be read but to be performed and seen, it is clear that the playwrights must almost certainly have attached equal importance to the stage-setting and other scenic elements as to the actual text. The works of the three Greek tragedians have been the subject of research for many centuries and the lack of contemporary information on the Greek theatre has provided grounds for numerous speculations. Very important studies have been written on Greek tragedy, Aristotle's *Poetics* being undoubtedly one of the most remarkable. His book, apart from being the first attempt to give a detailed outline of Greek tragic art, is valuable as it provides information on many plays which have been lost, and which would be unknown to us otherwise. Furthermore, as Aristotle was almost contemporary with the three

tragedians and therefore must have seen some of their plays performed, his *Poetics* gives us some idea of how the audience of the time perceived the tragedies.

Modern studies are equally important, for instance Kitto's *Greek Tragedy* (1961), which concentrates on the theoretical background of drama and also attempts a detailed analysis of all the known plays. Although there are various references to the stage-setting, Kitto appears to follow Aristotle's example in not regarding it as of equal importance as the other dramatic elements, such as plot or the personalities of the characters.

Apart from the studies on Greek drama in general, many authors have concentrated their interest on one dramatist in particular. There are also comparative studies of the three ancient Greek dramas on the Electra-myth. They mainly describe how the characters differ in each play and give reasons for this. Others focus on the text and the linguistic differences, and some analyse and explain the differences between the plots. However, the majority of the books written on the scenic elements of Greek drama, although very informative, rarely attempt a comparative analysis of the scenic presentation of the tragedies they are examining.

As the three other writers whose plays are discussed in this study are as famous as the Greek ones and can be regarded as 'classics', much research has been done on their work as well. Various aspects of Hugo von Hofmannsthal's work have been explored: for instance Walter Jens examined the influence the Greeks had on the writer in his book *Hofmannsthal und die Griechen* (1955), Wolfgang Nehring dealt with the problem of pre-existence in his *Die Tat bei Hofmannsthal* (1966), and the way women are portrayed in Hofmannsthal's plays has been the subject of Hugo Wyss's *Die Frau in der Dichtung Hofmannsthals* (1954). Numerous studies also concentrate on the problem of the inadequacy of language as presented in Hofmannsthal's short prose piece *Ein Brief*, while others try to understand and interpret Hofmannsthal in the light of his *Ad me ipsum*. His tragedy *Elektra* has naturally been the subject of extensive research as well, and was even

one of the themes discussed at the last meeting of the Hofmannsthal-Gesellschaft in September 1991, although the operatic version and not the play usually attracts most interest. As Hofmannsthal himself pointed to the significance of the stage-setting of his play by publishing the 'Szenische Vorschriften zu *Elektra*', various researchers have published studies of the tragedy's scenic elements, discussing especially their symbolic function. Although Hofmannsthal's play has been examined in comparison with Sophocles' *Elektra*, most studies focus on the different way the main dramatic themes are presented and overlook the scenic presentation.[3]

In a similar way, Eugene O'Neill's personality and work have been a centre of scholarly attention for many decades. Many studies have focused on his biography, for instance Arthur and Barbara Gelb's *O'Neill* (1962), and Croswell Bowen's *The Curse of the Misbegotten: A Tale of the House of O'Neill* (1959), which the author wrote in cooperation with O'Neill's younger son, Shane. Many articles in journals have discussed O'Neill's debts to Strindberg, Nietzsche and Freud, as well as the themes he appeared to be preoccupied with such as the sea and the worship of the woman. Like Hofmannsthal, O'Neill himself suggested both in his own notes and in the stage-directions of his plays, that he considered the scenic presentation a vital dramatic element. In the script of his tragedy *Desire Under the Elms* he went so far as to draw in pencil the scenery as he imagined it; he drew the main building outside which the play takes place, surrounded by elms. He also pointed out that the scenic elements he used in *Mourning Becomes Electra* have a symbolic function, the analysis of which has been the purpose of many studies. Nevertheless, although O'Neill did nothing to conceal the fact that he modelled his trilogy on the *Oresteia* and that he admired the ancient Greek tragedians and their work, very few studies comparing O'Neill's trilogy with the Greek tragedies have been published,

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[3] As Hofmannsthal himself mentioned that his play was modelled on Sophocles' *Electra*, most comparative studies examine these two plays.

Among these Barrett H. Clark's 'Aeschylus and O'Neill' (1932), and Friedrich Brie's 'Eugene O'Neill als Nachfolger der Griechen' (1933) focus mainly on the plot and the characters.

In contrast, Gerhart Hauptmann's work has often been interpreted in connection with Greek drama and culture. His memoir of his trip through Greece, *Griechischer Frühling*, confirms his admiration for the country, which was revealed to him not only in its classic, but also in its primitive form. This is the essence of Rolf Michaelis's book *Der Schwarze Zeus* (1962), where Hauptmann's preoccupation with chthonian deities is considered in depth. A similar theme is also treated in Dietrich Meinert's *Hellenismus und Christentum in Gerhart Hauptmann's Atriden-Tetralogie* (1964) where the philosophical background of Hauptmann's tetralogy is highlighted. Furthermore, biographical studies have been made, such as Wolfgang Leppmann's *Gerhart Hauptmann. Leben, Werk und Zeit* (1986). Hans von Brescius's *Gerhart Hauptmann, Zeitgeschehen und Bewußtsein in unbekannten Selbstzeugnissen* (1976) is primarily a study of Hauptmann's views about the Hitler-regime and the severe impact the Second World War had upon him. Peter Delvaux's recently published book (1992) is basically an outline of Hauptmann's development as a writer. Unfortunately, like most similar studies, it refers to *Elektra* only as part of the *Atriden-Tetralogie*. The two one-act plays *Agamemnon's Tod* and *Elektra* are usually considered only as link-plays between the two Iphigenie dramas (*Iphigenie in Aulis* and *Iphigenie auf Delphi*), disregarding the fact that they were first written as individual plays, although belonging to the cycle. The scenic presentation of Hauptmann's *Elektra* is also a much neglected topic.

One comparative study has been published on Hofmannsthal's and Hauptmann's *Elektra* (Hugo Garten: 'Hofmannsthals und Hauptmanns Elektra', (1973)). No such research has been published, however, on O'Neill and Hauptmann, although a certain

analogy exists between them, both as individuals and as playwrights, as becomes clear from a study of their biographies.

One of the most important comparative works on my research topic is of course Käte Hamburger's *From Sophocles to Sartre* (1969). Its subject is the different ways in which the main characters of most plays on mythological themes - both ancient and modern - are presented. Alfred Wolkowitz's dissertation 'The Myth of the Atridae in Classic and Modern Drama' (New York University, 1973), is similar in thrust, the only difference being that he is primarily looking at the differences in plot. Some older dissertations on the topic either focus only on the modern adaptations, for instance J.M. Burian's 'A Study of Twentieth Century Adaptations of the Greek Atreidae Dramas' (Cornell University, 1950) and G. Fuhrmann's 'Der Atridenmythos im modernen Drama' (University of Würzburg, 1950), or concentrate on the development of the theme. This is the basic task in J. Busch's 'Das Geschlecht der Atriden in Mykene. Eine Stoffgeschichte der dramatischen Bearbeitungen in der Weltliteratur' (University of Göttingen, 1951), in R.W. Corrigan's 'The Electra Theme in the History of Drama' (University of Minnessota, 1955), and in N. Soule-Subsielles's 'Le développement du thème d' Electre dans le drame depuis Eschyle jusqu'à O'Neill' (University of Paris, 1958). These works were useful to me for the background material they provided. More importantly, the fact that they neglected the study of the scenic presentation of the plays they were examining confirmed my belief that a comparative analysis of the scenic elements of the plays in question was a hitherto unexplored area.

My aim in the present study has been to underline the significance of the scenic presentation of the plays discussed and, in so doing, to show that the differences and similarities in the choice of the scenic elements in the plays may be connected with the historical and ideological background and other factors which influenced the dramatists. These factors will be specifically observed and discussed in general and in detail in the

case of each individual play. However, before embarking on the analysis of the actual plays, it might be advisable to define the term 'scenic presentation', the examination of which is the focal point of this study.

The word 'scenic' derives from the word 'scene'. This in turn comes via Latin from the Greek word *skene* which means 'stage'.[4] The connection between the terms 'scenic' and 'stage' is therefore obvious. Scenic presentation may be defined as the presentation on stage during a theatrical performance of certain - mostly visual - elements which enhance the development of the plot and bring out the personalities of the characters, and therefore help the audience to comprehend the play. The stage-setting or background in front of which the events take place is one of these scenic elements. In the ancient Greek theatre it almost always consisted of an edifice with three doors (representing a palace or a temple) set at the back of the *skene* or stage. In modern theatre, however, the stage-setting can represent anything: the play can be set in an enclosed or an open-air space, it may be 'artificial' - the interior of a room - or 'natural'- the sea, a forest, a lake. It can display poverty or wealth, happiness or gloom, peace or war. In addition, a change of scene (which was rather uncommon in ancient Greek theatre) is a usual occurence in modern stage-productions. This has been made possible mainly by the invention of mechanical devices.

The lighting which usually accentuates the stage-setting is a means of scenic presentation which has been particularly exploited by modern playwrights and directors since the introduction of gas and electricity. As they lacked the help of artificial light, the ancient dramatists could not present a realistically light or dark setting and had to depend on the imagination of their audience. The spoken text was the only means open to them, so they made the characters mention certain natural elements - the sun, the stars, the dark

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[4] The word *skene* in Greek also means 'tent'. From this we may deduce that the first *skenes* (stages) had obvious similarities to a tent.

night, etc. - which would indicate the lighting of the play.[5] Further scenic elements employed in stage-productions (old and new) are the costumes of the actors and various properties or objects which again help and give visual shape and focus to the development of the play: The verbal reference to an object seen on stage accentuates its meaning and function.

Scenic presentation is on two dimensions, as it is visual as well as verbal. As already observed in the case of lighting in ancient theatre, the scenic elements can be presented by the spoken text; although this was absolutely necessary only for the indication of lighting, the dramatists also used words as a way to emphasize other scenic elements. Particular importance is attached here to this 'indirect' type of scenic presentation as it is usually by means of it that the symbolic function of the scenic elements is made apparent.

[5] In Aishylos' *Choephoroi* and Euripides' *Electra* the image of twilight or darkness is created by the evocation of natural elements connected with the night. In a similar way, in Sophocles' *Electra* the luminous atmosphere is mainly created by the characters' frequent references to the sun.

PART I:
THE HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND OF THE SIX PLAYS

CHAPTER ONE:
THE POLITICAL CULTURAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND OF THE ANCIENT GREEK PLAYS

1. Aischylos: *Choephoroi*

Aischylos was born in Eleusis, a town in Attica known for its mystic ceremonies, in 525 B.C. His father Ephorion belonged to an old aristocratic family. Aischylos participated at the battle of Marathon and sea-fight of Salamis. He spent all his life in Attica and travelled at least twice to Sicily where, according to tradition, he died in 456 B.C. by a ludicrous accident. As he was sitting by the roadside an eagle flying above with a tortoise in its talons saw the sunshine reflected on his bald head, took it for a stone and dropped the tortoise to crack its shell.

His trilogy *Oresteia* was produced in 458 B.C.[1] With this play the poet was almost certainly calling attention to one of the most important and burning issues of his time, the Ephialtic Reforms of 462-461 B.C. It was the victory of the radical, democratic party of Athens - of which Ephialtes and Pericles were the leading spokesmen - over the old conservative Cimon and his supporters. Cimon had organized an expedition to help the Spartans against their Helot revolutionaries. Ephialtes and his radicals strongly

[1] Scholars agree that this date is certain, as there is archaeological evidence that the trilogy won the first prize when it was presented at the dramatic contest at the Dionysia-festival in 458 B.C. See Stathis I. Dromazos, *Arhaio Drama* (Athens: Kedros, 1984), p.37.

disapproved of Cimon's scheme to aid the Spartans, but Cimon determined to carry through the traditional conservative policy of close cooperation with Sparta, all the same. After the Athenian forces had helped them to besiege their enemies, the Spartans spurned further Athenian assistance. Cimon returned to Athens in humiliation, the conservative policies were discredited and the radicals had every right to rejoice, as they finally saw their chance: Cimon was ostracized and the conservative party was deprived of its superiority. In addition, the Areopagus (the highest Athenian court and a traditional conservative establishment) was stripped of its wide powers. Its jurisdiction was reduced to homicidal cases, whereas before it also possessed wide administrative powers. Cimon's humiliation in Sparta had a sudden and severe repercussion on the international scene as well: Thucydides relates that immediately upon their return the Athenians gave up the alliance with the Spartans against the Persians and became allies of their (the Spartans') enemies, the Argives. At the same time Athens was also at war with the Persians in Egypt, something about which the conservative party showed strong disapproval.

It is evident from his play that the Ephialtic Reforms must have influenced Aischylos. The fact that he set the first two plays of the trilogy (*Agamemnon-Choephoroi*) in Argos and not in Mycene where, according to the mythological tradition the Atridean palace originally was, seems to point to the fact that he wanted to stress the importance of the Argive alliance. What remains uncertain is whether Aischylos welcomed the radical political changes which took place in his time. It is believed that, although he belonged to an oligarchic, conservative family, he was in favour of the democratic party and its policy. In the *Oresteia* and especially in the third play the *Eumenides*, significant emphasis is given to the importance of the Areopagus. This can either be interpreted as the expression of Aischylos' disappointment with the reforms and his return to conservative ideas, or as an utterance of his approval of the new function of the Areopagus. Undoubtedly, the *Eumenides* can be regarded as an eulogy on the

establishment of the Areopagus. Aischylos makes it clear that Orestes is finally acquitted there, even after the god Apollo had failed in purifying him in Delphi. All the same, it is significant that the playwright only refers to the jurisdiction the Areopagus had after the reforms (solving homicidal cases) and completely ignores its former powers. On the other hand, a sign of his disfavour of the new order might be the fact that almost immediately after the *Oresteia* was presented and Pericles came to power Aischylos left Athens, where he had spent all his life, and went to Sicily, where he died two years later. From that we might conclude that the reforms were too radical for him: that he was up to a point in favour of the new order; but that after Pericles came to power as the leader of the democratic party and started modifying all the traditional principles in Athens, Aischylos found it hard to live in a city that no longer had any of the characteristics he was used to. Although he was openminded enough to realize that all the innovations would be beneficial for Athens, he found himself so unfamiliar with the new situation that he had to leave his city and flee to the court of the tyrant of Gela in Sicily where the old aristocratic ideals were still in existence.[2]

In order to appreciate the highly pious and majestic Aischylean style one must constantly bear in mind that Greek Tragedy was developed from archaic religious ceremonies. As Greece was divided by mountains into many communities - which later developed into the city-states of the classical period - various gods and heroes were regarded as having each community under their protection. At various times in the year it was necessary for the people to placate them by sacrifices and celebrations in their honour. These would fall at all the times of greatest importance to the farming community, sowing, harvest and the vintage, around which their whole life revolved. It was natural at these festivals to celebrate the gods and the heroes in song. These hymns

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[2] Stathis Dromazos also suggests that Aischylos' leaving Athens might be connected with his possible disapproval of the new political order, p.40.

were delivered by choruses, and their composition soon became a matter of pride and importance. So there came into existence a number of lyrical poems highly dramatic in context, though not in form; they were still merely narrative.

One of the major gods in whose honour big festivals were being organized was Dionysus. At the opening of the historic age of Greece (seventh century B.C.) the cult of the 'new god' - Dionysus -, glaringly opposed to the famous Greek obsession for measure and limitation, came to the country from Thrace. In its origin it was most probably a means of influencing by magic the fertility of the earth, something that a prehistoric, almost barbarian society was not in the least foreign to. But when the new cult spread in the orderly country of Hellas, this particular element must have seemed shockingly awkward and too much of a vulgarity to embrace; it was therefore almost immediately discontinued. There remained as the characteristic trait of the new ceremonies the element of ecstasy, which was achieved with the help of the deafening music of tambourines, cymbals and flutes, and above all through orgiastic dance. The train of Dionysus was mainly composed of Bacchantes: women dressed in faun-skins, girt with living serpents, with thyrsi in their hands and wreaths of ivy in their hair, dancing in primitive, savage, feverish ecstasy, accompanied by wild, doxological lyrics.[3]

The orgies of Dionysus were initially confined in time and place; they could be held only on Parnassus and furthermore only once in two years. As the festivals of Dionysus were brought into connection with the work of wine-making, Attica was one of the first regions in Greece to adopt them. Nevertheless, it seems certain that the festival became important only in the sixth century B.C. Refined as they were, the Athenians modified the festivities in such a way that greater importance was attached to the lyric and mimetic part than the orgiastic ritual. It is believed that suddenly in about 534 B.C. in

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[3] In his study on Greek Theatre Rehm discusses the character of the Dionysian ceremonies and their connection to Greek Drama. See Rush Rehm, *Greek Tragic Theatre* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p.13. A description of a Dionysian ceremony is also given by Euripides in his tragedy *Bacchae*.

Athens at one of the Dionysian festivals a member of the chorus stepped forward and addressed the rest of the chorus. Hence, a sort of dialogue was created between Thespis, the first ever 'actor' and the chorus.[4]

As Aischylos was close to the tradition according to which drama was mostly a religious choral song, in all his plays - and especially in the early ones - the lyrical part is strongly emphasized. The grandeur of the language, even in the dramatic parts, indicates that all his tragedies derived from a religious cult. They were not meant to entertain or even to educate the audience as happened with Sophocles or Euripides. Instead they had a laudatory quality and they always stressed the significance of the divine will, the power of the gods, and sometimes their cruelty towards humans.

His having been born in Eleusis and his deep personal belief in the overwhelming power of the gods strongly influenced all the Aischylean tragedies, including his *Oresteia*. The first part of the *Choephoroi* is nothing but a long prayer of Electra and her brother Orestes by their father's tomb to the gods. Their seeking the assistance of chthonian deities recalls the prayers of the participants at the Eleusinian mystic ceremonies.[5] The Eleusinian mysteries were basically mysteries of the reviving grain: just as the grain perishes when buried in the earth but, after remaining a certain amount of time under its covering, rises again, so the soul of a man who has been buried rises again. This teaching found expression in a myth: Persephone, the daughter of Demeter was kidnapped by Hades, the ruler of the Underworld. Her mother, after long and painful wanderings, discovered the place of her abode and, after begging Zeus, she was allowed to spend two parts of the year with her daughter. Persephone, as a result of living with Hades, learned the secrets of the Underworld and revealed them to her mother. Demeter

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[4] On Thespis' revolutionary innovation see also Thomas Dwight Goodell, *Athenian Tragedy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1920), p.57.

[5] On the Eleusinian Mysteries see also George E. Mylonas, *Eleusis and the Eleusinian Mysteries*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), and Kevin M. Clinton, *The sacred officials of the Eleusinian Mysteries*, (Philadephia: American Philosophical Society, 1974).

and Persephone, knowing how a man may secure himself a better fate in the Underworld and because of their love for mankind, revealed their knowledge to men as well. With this aim they founded their mysteries in the city of Eleusis. At the festival of the Eleusinia people from all over Greece used to gather together and worship the goddesses with dances and songs by night, in the hope that later in the temple of the mysteries they would obtain the honour of attending a performance of a sacred drama. This would awaken in them the certainty that the soul is immortal and that it is going to have a better fate in the Underworld.[6] In the same way that the initiates were praying to Demeter and Persephone hoping to gain their favour and thus a better fate in the Underworld, Electra and Orestes are praying by their dead father's tomb for the chthonian gods' and Agamemnon's reassurance that their sacred deed will be successfully executed. The task they have to perform is difficult, but their strong faith in the gods, to whom their prayers are addressed, will enable them to carry it through.

[6] It is interesting to note at this point that Gerhart Hauptmann, who wrote a tetralogy on the same myth more than two thousand years after Aischylos' *Oresteia* was produced, also attaches considerable importance to the worship of chthonian deities - Demeter, Pluto and Persephone in particular. Hauptmann's particular interest in archaic Greece is expanded on pp. 186-199.

2. Sophocles: *Electra*

Sophocles was born in 496 B.C. in Colonos, a suburb near Athens. He spent all his life in the city and died as a very famous man. We do not exactly know when his *Electra* was produced, but scholars agree that it was between the years 419-413 B.C. This was the most crucial decade for the city of Athens. The Peloponnesean War had started a few years earlier, when the allies of the Athenians, mostly the Aegean islands, suffocating under the pressure of the Athenian hegemony, asked the Spartans to help them revolt against the Athenians. The Spartans, who found the Athenian imperialistic policy extremely dangerous, offered their help. The Athenians, overestimating their power, tried to help their colonies who were at war in Sicily, but were unpleasantly surprised to realize that their allies, instead of supporting them, declared war upon them with the powerful Spartans on their side. The Sicilian expedition was the biggest disaster the Athenians ever suffered. Thousands of men were either killed or captured, and the Athenian navy was totally destroyed. The Athenians returned home to find Athens being ruled by the Spartans with the assistance of the Persians, their greatest enemy. A few years later Athens completely lost its power. Although they were liberated from Spartan hegemony, they would never become again the mighty empire they once were. But even the Spartan dominion did not last long: It was time for Alexander the Great to start conquering Greece and the world.

It is usually assumed that *Electra* was produced just after the disastrous Sicilian expedition. At first it seems odd that in these critical and tragic years Sophocles should write a tragedy based on a mythological subject rather than choose a theme more suitable to the grave problems of the era. It looks as though Sophocles was refusing to face reality, a reality that must have been extremely painful for him to look at: he, who as a close friend of Pericles had witnessed the miracle of Athenian power, who had contributed to

what is known as the 'Golden Century', saw his beloved city being stripped of its majesty. But although he was deeply let down, he never stopped believing in the strength of Athens, he never stopped hoping that the days of glory would come back.[7]

Electra can be regarded as the precise expression of his disappointment but at the same time of his hopefulness. The heroine of the tragedy, who used to be a princess, now spends her living days in humiliation, despised even by the slaves. Everybody has deserted her, as her obedient sister has decided to compromise with the will of the murderers and usurpers of the throne and her only brother is exiled far away from home. But the will to restore the moral order grows so demanding inside her that she finally finds the energy to act alone. And it is the justice of her cause and not divine assistance that leads her to victory over the murderers.

The tragedy seems to be a hymn to the personality of Electra. A certain parallel can be drawn between her and the city of Athens. The great city that used to be a powerful metropolis - just as Electra used to be a princess - now finds itself in the humiliating position of being ruled by the Spartans, who also have their equivalent in the characters of Aigisthos and Clytemnestra. Athens was abandoned by its allies who accepted the Spartan dominion, and Electra's sister Chrysothemis has obediently placed herself at the service of the tyrants. A city that used to be the cradle of civilization and democracy is now under the thumb of the conservative Spartan oligarchy. But its people - and Sophocles amongst them - have not lost their faith in their strength and their hope for a better future. They still trust that Athens will find the energy to overcome all the difficulties and become again the great power it used to be. Unfortunately, Sophocles lived too long and realized that his dreams would never come true.

Apart from the tragic political events of his era, Sophocles was also influenced by the important changes in the cultural and philosophical sphere in fifth-century Athens.

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[7] Dromazos also shares this opinion, p.193.

The influence can easily be detected in his plays. In the years following the 'Great Fifty Years', the foundations of the traditional religious and moral order were found insufficient, especially because at that time the Greeks did not have an official body of philosopher-theologians to interpret and consolidate the mythological tradition. In addition, the citizens of Athens, who had experienced the miracle of Athenian magnificence and were taught to believe in their mental power only, found it extremely hard to have faith in anthropomorphic deities. In these years of confusion the Sophists appeared to make things even worse, though without any evil intention.[8] Because the Athenian citizen of that time was mostly interested in success in public life, professional teachers were required to reveal the secrets of this art. The Sophists were initially travelling professors. The central subject of their courses was rhetoric, the art of persuasion by eloquent speech, and they claimed to be able to teach their pupils to speak persuasively and to argue both sides of any case. The problem started when, overestimating their popularity amongst their pupils, they started preaching about philosophical and religious matters without being qualified to do so. Led by their relativist humanism the Sophists spread the theory that religion and morality were simply a matter of man-made custom. Although for them this did not by any means imply that a man should not observe the customary morality of the society in which he lived, a certain cynical immorality was created amongst their pupils, who, misunderstanding their teachers' words and intentions, developed the doctrine that morality is only the right of the stronger. The influence of the Sophists undoubtedly helped towards the progress of disintegration, for they destroyed the sanctities of tradition in the minds of their students and put nothing adequate in their place.

And suddenly one man appeared, who amidst the general confusion and ethical decadence was trying to find a better solution to the problem of human *eudaemonia* and

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[8] On the role of the Sophists in Athens of the fifth century B.C. see Rehm, p.5.

was openly declaring his faith in a unique God. This was Socrates, and his spirit greatly influenced all his contemporaries. Socrates himself wrote nothing, and all our contact with him is through what survives of what his friends and disciples wrote about him. Most information about Socrates' life and teaching derives from the books of his disciple Plato. Although it is difficult to determine precisely where Socrates' philosophy ends and Plato's begins, it seems almost certain that the basic point of Socratic philosophy is the new definition he gave to the soul. The soul (psyche) for Socrates was the intellectual and moral personality, the responsible agent in knowing and acting rightly and wrongly. Therefore, the care of the soul should be the supreme human activity, as it is only through the goodness of the soul that the desired *eudaemonia* can be obtained. Another important doctrine of Socrates that derives from his basic theory of the soul is that no man is evil by nature: wickedness is ignorance and goodness is knowledge. A man who acts in an evil way does not do so because he has an evil soul, but because, ignorant as he is, he thinks that this is the best way to preserve the health and integrity of his soul, to acquire *eudaemonia*.

In his *Electra* Sophocles used both the Sophistic art of persuasion and certain extracts of the Socratic teaching. Electra's attempt to persuade her sister to aid her to punish Agamemnon's murderers is a masterpiece of rhetoric art. Her speech has strong arguments, tactics and method. She knows exactly what to say and how and when to say it. It is obvious that Sophocles must have been aware of the Sophistic way of conversing and arguing. And although Electra does not succeed in making her sister her accomplice she does not blame her; she just expresses her disappointment at her sister's ignorance and lack of wisdom:

ELECTRA:

You're so clever! So clever and so wrong. (vs.1039)[9]

[...]

ELECTRA:

Go inside. We are walking separate paths.

However much you try, you'll not persuade me:

You're chasing shadows - a foolish task. (vs.1052-54)

CHRYSOTHEMIS:

Go on, then, if you think yourself so wise.

But when you've tried and failed, when you suffer,

You'll remember my words and agree at last. (vs.1055-57)

Evidently both sisters stick to their opinions for no other reason but their conviction that what they are doing is the right thing. Both are acting according to their ideals, both try to preserve the health of their soul - to use a Socratic term - to gain their *eudaemonia*. To Electra's mind Chrysothemis is not evil or coward; she is just ignorant. And this is exactly what Chrysothemis thinks of her sister, as well: she is not mad or revengeful; she just possesses a different kind of wisdom. Electra is fighting for what she defines as moral order. Whether her actions are according to religion or not is irrelevant. Her mind has been made up a long time now: *'I've made up my mind; I'll never change.'* (vs. 1048) She is determined to carry through her plan, even if it will lead to her own death: At this point it is impossible not to recall that Socrates drank hemlock in 399 B.C. refusing to escape from prison, when his disciples came to rescue him, dying for his ideals and the salvation of his soul.

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[9] Sophocles, *Electra*, trans. by Kenneth McLeish (London: Methuen, 1990).

3. Euripides: *Electra*

Euripides was born in Salamis in about 485 B.C. His father's wealth enabled him to pursue higher education, something rather uncommon in his time. His contemporaries were Socrates, Thukydides, Pericles, Ippocrates and he was a close friend of Herodotus, Phidias and Anaxagoras. He died in 406 B.C. in Pella, the capital-city of Macedonia while staying with King Archelaos. His *Electra* was almost certainly produced in 413 B.C. and it is not certain whether the Sophoclean or the Euripidean play was presented first.[10] The historical-political background of the play is the Peloponnesean War and the disaster in Sicily. Although it is almost certain that the presentation of the *Electra* preceded the Athenian defeat in Sicily, things must have already started to go wrong for the Athenian forces at the time the tragedy was being performed: After having given the solution at the end of the tragedy, the Dioskouroi leave saying that they must go and try to save some sinking ships near Sicily. Just by reading the tragedy and comparing it with the historical events of the spring and summer of 413 B.C. one becomes immediately aware of the fact that the atmosphere of *Electra* is almost identical to the one in which the Athenians of that time were living. The tragedy is set in an atmosphere of evil destructive envy, which causes death and unhappiness. Electra drives her brother to matricide just out of insane jealousy towards her mother.

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[10] Most scholars agree that the assumption that Euripides' *Electra* was presented in 413 B.C. is safe. In his introduction to Euripides' *Electra* J. D. Denniston notes that 'it can hardly be doubted that 1347-8 [where the Dioskouroi mention the need to go to Sicily and save some sinking ships] is a direct reference to the relief expedition which sailed from Athens to Sicily in the spring of that year.' See Euripides *Electra*, ed. by J. D. Denniston (Oxford: Clarendon, 1939), p.xxxix. Dromazos (p320) also suggests that the Sophoclean *Electra* was presented first, as with the verse 615 - where Orestes' pedagogue warns Orestes that it will be difficult to enter the palace without being seen by the guards - Euripides was criticizing Sophocles' tragedy, where Orestes enters the palace unnoticed. On the problem of dating see also Euripides *Electra*, ed. by J. D. Denniston, pp.xxxvi-xxxix.

Alcibiades was the black sheep of the time. Clever, cunning and ruthless, a person who double-crossed the Athenians by revealing all their secret strategy for the Sicilian expedition to the Spartans, after the Athenians had invested all their hopes in him, he was bitterly hated in Athens but also strongly envied because of the enormous power he possessed. The odour of defeat was already reaching Athens causing a feeling of distress, uneasiness and uncertainty amongst its citizens. They might have found themselves as emotionally perplexed as Electra, hating Alcibiades but at the same time acknowledging his power (as the heroine feels about her mother), deciding to act by starting out on the Sicilian expedition (as Electra is cunningly planning Clytemnestra's murder) without being certain whether that would bring their glory or disaster, but dreading the latter all the same. More rational and down-to-earth than Sophocles, Euripides could not bring himself to believe in internal powers and strong personalities. With his *Electra* he might have tried to warn his fellow-Athenians where their imperialistic mania was driving them. But it was already too late. A few months later Athens was witnessing in terror the beginning of its end.

The confusion and disorientation in the intellectual sphere caused mainly by the Sophists, the strong rationalism of the era, and the religious crisis intensified by Socrates' teaching about 'new divinities' are reflected in the Euripidean tragedy. The tenseness in the air is obvious: Orestes comes back home during the night, hides when he sees Electra approaching, is afraid to reveal his identity. He is confused, indecisive, has no particular plan of action. At this point the Athenian spectators might have recognized in the puzzled hero their bewildered selves. He meets Electra, who, horrified to see a stranger with a sword in his hands, mutters: *'I stand here utterly in your power.You are stronger.'* (vs 228)[11] Euripides evidently makes use of the misinterpretation of the Sophistic doctrine, according to which morality is only the right of the stronger. The relationship between

[11] Euripides, *Electra*, trans. by Emily Townsend Vermeule (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939).

Clytemnestra and Electra can be taken as another example: Clytemnestra is more powerful; therefore Electra's life of humiliation, though not pleasant for her and not appropriate for a princess, is certainly understandable and justifiable. She herself acknowledges her humiliation and acts accordingly - for instance, she fetches water and cleans the house, - whereas her Sophoclean counterpart was always the proud, brave princess, in spite of the ordeals she was put through, refusing to give in, acting only according to her moral standards.

The rationalistic influence of the Sophists is also traceable in the play. Electra finds it ludicrous to believe that a lock of her brother's hair could match with hers. And even if it did, it would not prove anything, as even total strangers happen to have the same colour of hair. And how could her brother's footprints be the same as hers? A man's foot is definitely bigger than a girl's. It has been suggested by Kitto that Euripides is deliberately mocking Aischylos.[12] One would think however, that living in an era when rationalism was a way of living, Euripides could not help writing his play under this particular influence.

One of the main principles the Athenians of the last years of the fifth century B.C. were beginning to have doubts about, was their religion. The whole mythological tradition appeared too naive to believe in, and although Socrates was sentenced to death for introducing 'new divinities' one would expect that many of his contemporaries shared his views. Disbelief in the omnipotence and omniscience of the Olympian gods rather than a form of atheism was developed. It is true that Socrates' theory that God was an invisible spirit was too radical to be accepted by a society which believed in anthropomorphic deities. But still, the time when religion played the most significant role in people's lives was gone for ever. Euripides' *Electra* is an indication that religion was

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[12] H.D.F. Kitto, *Greek Tragedy* 3rd edn (London: Methuen, 1961), p.80.

beginning to lose ground. First of all, Electra makes it clear that she does not believe in the gods who have deserted her:

> *ELECTRA:*
> *Gods? Not one god has heard*
> *my helpless cry or watched of old*
> *over my murdered father.* (vs 199-201)

Furthermore, Orestes commits the most serious sacrilege when he murders Aigisthos from behind while a sacrifice to the gods is in process. Finally, when he sees Clytemnestra approaching and Electra urges him to kill her, he exclaims in terror: *'O Phoebus, your holy word was brute and ignorant!'* (vs 971) And when his sister tries to persuade him that killing their mother would be an act of justice, simply because it is a divine command, he answers in the most hybristic way: *'A polluted demon spoke in the shape of god. [...] And I shall not believe those oracles were pure.'* (vs 979-81) The tragedy finishes with the Dioskouroi, two secondary deities, putting all the blame on Apollo, one of the most important of the twelve gods: *'On Phoebus I place all guilt for this death.'* (vs 1296)

It is obvious that although Euripides still believed in the existence of the gods he did not trust them as entirely as Aischylos did. And with this tragedy he might have tried to show his compatriots who believed that they were acting under the aegis of the goddess Athena, and therefore were protected, that a god is not always able to save men from the consequences of their deeds.

CHAPTER TWO:
THE HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND OF HUGO VON HOFMANNSTHAL'S *ELEKTRA*

Greek Influence

It is not at all surprising that Hugo von Hofmannsthal should involve himself with the treatment of an ancient Greek myth. Not only did he receive a classical education from a very early age (he was able to read Homer in the original at the age of fifteen), but he also considered Greek language and dramaturgy as one of his favourite topics, as Edmund von Hellmer, one of his school-friends, recalls:

> Von den übrigen Gegenständen des Unterrichtes interessierten ihn wohl am meisten die alten Sprachen; und er ging in diesem Interesse soweit, daß er eine Zeitlang nicht bloß in seine mündliche, sondern auch in seine schriftliche Rede sowohl lateinische Worte und Wendungen einzuflechten pflegte als auch griechische - zu meiner nicht seltenen Verlegenheit, da ich höchstens ein befriedigender Lateiner und Grieche war.[1]

The reason why he selected the Electra-myth in particular as the theme of his own play is given in the following statement:

> 17 VII. *Elektra* - der erste Einfall kam mir anfangs September 1901. Ich las damals, um für die 'Pompilia' Gewisses zu lernen, den *Richard III* und die *Elektra* von Sophokles. Sogleich verwandelte sich die Gestalt dieser Elektra in eine andere. Auch das Ende stand sogleich da: daß sie nicht

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[1] Edmund von Hellmer, 'Hofmannsthal als Gymnasiast', in *Hugo von Hofmannsthal: Die Gestalt des Dichters im Spiegel der Freunde.*, ed. by Helmut A. Fiechter (Vienna: Humboldt, 1949), p.11.

> mehr weiterleben kann, daß wenn der Streich gefallen ist, ihr Leben und ihr Eingeweide ihr entstürzen muß, wie der Drohne, wenn sie die Königin befruchtet hat, mit dem befruchteten Stachel zugleich Eingeweide und Leben entstürzen. Die Verwandtschaft und der Gegensatz zu Hamlet waren mir auffallend. Als Stil schwebte mir vor, etwas Gegensätzliches zu *Iphigenie* zu machen, etwas worauf das Wort nicht passe: 'dieses graecisierende Produkt erschien mir beim erneuten Lesen verteufelt human'. (Goethe an Schiller).[2]

When Hofmannsthal presented his own version of the Greek myth in the early years of the twentieth century he was not the first dramatist writing in the German language to do this. The fact that plays based on Greek myths had been written by such distinguished dramatists as Goethe and Grillparzer might have been a challenge for Hofmannsthal. Influenced by Winckelmann's view of antiquity and by the general ideas their era had about ancient Greece, Goethe presented in *Iphigenie* a radiant, optimistic, idealized world which was almost reaching perfection, as far as the personalities of the characters were concerned. The fact that in Hofmannsthal's *Elektra* the psychological aspect of the play is highlighted and that the scenery serves to emphasize the feelings of the characters rather than to create a 'Greek' effect, made Gerhart Hauptmann consider Hofmannsthal's *Elektra* as definitely not Greek, as Hermann Bahr records in 1907 while reviewing a play production by the 'Berliner Kleines Theater':

> Wie wir jetzt die Griechen sehen, als ein Volk, das vergeblich im Glanze feierlicher Reden, flatternder Musik, verzaubernder Gebärden die dumpfe Not unseliger Menschen zu vergessen sucht, hat sie Hofmannsthal in

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[2] Hugo von Hofmannsthal, 'Aufzeichnungen aus dem Nachlaß 1904', in *Aufzeichnungen 1889-1929* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1980), p.452

> seiner Elektra gezeigt. Ob diese denn eigentlich griechisch sei, ist viel gestritten worden. Nein, hat Hauptmann einmal gesagt; er liebe das Stück, aber griechisch sei es nicht. Denn bei den Griechen scheint im tiefsten Leid aus der Ferne doch immer das blaue Meer herein! Hauptmann hat recht; das ganze griechische Wesen kann man gar nicht besser aussagen: 'Tiefstes Leid, immer mit dem Blick aufs blaue Meer'. Aber nachdem man uns hundert Jahre nun immer nur das blaue Meer im griechischen gezeigt, war es an der Zeit, uns endlich wieder das ungeheure Leid fühlen zu lassen, auf dem alles griechische Wesen ruht.[3]

Hauptmann was almost certainly thinking of Franz Grillparzer, for the sea as the scenic background absent in Hofmannsthal's *Elektra* was especially favoured by him. In his stage-directions for *Sappho*, *Der Gastfreund*, *Die Argonauten* and *Medea* he describes the setting with exactly the same words: 'Im Hintergrund das Meer'.[4]

The essential difference between Hofmannsthal's *Elektra* and the ancient Greek plays is the fact that whereas the Greeks seem to have been far closer to the roots of a mythological tradition, Hofmannsthal deliberately adjusted this still further to the reality of his own era: the play is saturated with the Viennese atmosphere of the beginning of the century. The philosophers Friedrich Nietzsche and Erwin Rohde and the psychiatrists Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer were amongst Hofmannsthal's most famous contemporaries and their theories undoubtedly influenced the writer. E.M. Butler notes:

> Almost contemporaneously with this theoretical interpretation of Greek tragedy in the light of Freud, there appeared Hofmannsthal's *Elektra*, the

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[3] *Hofmannsthal Blätter*, 37/38 (1988), p.26.
[4] Franz Grillparzer, *Sämtliche Werke* I, ed. by Peter Frank and Karl Pörnbacher (Munich: Hauser, 1960), pp.713-889.

practical pendant to it, possibly but not certainly an independent product of the ideas circulating so intoxicatingly in Vienna just then.[5]

W. E. Yates in his recently published book notes that Hofmannsthal had read both Erwin Rohde's *Psyche* and Breuer's and Freud's *Studies on Hysteria.*[6] However, it would be incorrect to maintain that *Elektra* is a blend of the theories current at the time. *Elektra* is neither a psycho-analytical nor a philosophical play. It is primarily a drama, and Hofmannsthal was influenced by his environment as Sophocles may have been by his. Nevertheless, it is above all a genuine Hofmannsthal play: the problem of pre-existence, as well as the inadequacy of words as means of expression, both basic concepts of Hofmannsthal's which appear in all his plays and are directly referred to in the *Brief des Lord Chandos* and *ad me ipsum*, are essential elements of *Elektra*. Therefore, it would be advisable to explore them further in more theoretical terms before tracing them and analysing their function in the actual play.

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[5] Butler, 'Hofmannsthal's *Elektra*: A Graeco-Freudian Myth', p.167.
[6] W. E. Yates, *Schnitzler, Hofmannsthal and the Austrian Theatre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

Nietzsche's Influence

Almost thirty years before Sigmund Freud used the figures of Greek mythology such as Oedipus and Electra as instances in order to present, justify and explain his theories about the neuroses and the meaning of dreams, Friedrich Nietzsche was the first man within the Germanic tradition to break free from the traditional concept of Greek antiquity created mainly by Winckelmann, according to which Hellenism was almost always synonymous with purity and serenity. Nietzsche arrived at different conclusions about the Greek world because he started from a different basis. Winckelmann and the classical authors of the eighteenth century - with Goethe as their major representative - had recreated the ancient world in their minds by examining Greek and Roman statues and reading Homer's majestic epics. Judging mainly by the grace and aesthetic perfection of classical sculpture and the heroic deeds in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, they presented an analogous image of a 'perfect' world which hardly corresponded to any human standards, although not totally unaware of the dark side of Greece. M.S. Silk and J.P. Stern, in their book *Nietzsche on Tragedy*, note that:

> In ancient Greece, Winckelmann saw the embodiment of an ideal: an ideal of visual beauty, and more particularly, of a whole mode of life dominated by visual beauty. His ideas derived partly from his youthful reading of Greek literature, but largely from his studies of Greek statuary - or, in most cases, later copies of Greek statuary - in Germany and Rome. From the contemplation of these copies he distilled 'the spirit of Greek art', which became, for him and his successors, not only the characteristic of *all* Greek art (poetic as well as visual), but also the criterion of aesthetic value-

judgements in general. The perfection this 'spirit' reveals is a perfection of static harmony.[7]

In antithesis to this Friedrich Nietzsche arrived at his concept of antiquity by studying ancient Greek tragedy and myth. He soon discovered a duality in the Greek spirit: it appeared to him that the Greeks were acutely aware of the terrors and horrors of existence which they presented superbly in their tragic myths. They created the dream-world of the Olympian gods as a veil which would cover up the miseries of their life. As Nietzsche puts it: 'Der Grieche kannte und empfand die Schrecken und Entsetzlichkeiten des Daseins: um überhaupt leben zu können, mußte er vor sie hin die glänzende Traumgeburt der Olympischen stellen.'[8] But behind the aesthetic screen was hidden their tragic actuality, an accurate portrayal of which was their mythology, recognized for the first time as such by Nietzsche. The Greeks went as far in their vision of a perfect world as to insert their ideals into a literature of escapism. Homer with his heroic, majestic epics was the major representative of this trend, which was defined by Nietzsche as 'Apolline': 'Die homerische "Naivität" ist nur als der vollkommene Sieg der apollinischen Illusion zu begreifen.' (p. 31) But there was a kind of art in which the Greeks were not only not seeking to escape from their reality, but were also outlining it as truthfully as possible: the ecstatic Dionysian art of music. The combination of the two produced Greek tragedy. This radical theory is the main point of Nietzsche's book *Die Geburt der Tragödie* (1872), which was widely discussed within the intellectual circles of the time.

Although Hofmannsthal himself did not directly state that the theoretical basis of his *Elektra* could be found in *Die Geburt der Tragödie* there is strong evidence which supports this hypothesis. First of all, it is certain that Nietzsche's philosophy in general had an impact on Hofmannsthal, as proved by the latter's following statement in 1891:

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[7] M. S. Silk and J. P. Stern, *Nietzsche on Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univeristy Press, 1981), p.5.
[8] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie* ed. by Karl Schlechta, I, (Munich: Hanser, 1955), p. 30.

'Nietzsche ist die Temperatur, in der sich meine Gedanken kristallisieren.'[9] More importantly, Hofmannsthal expressed his reservations about Goethe's dramatic creation in 1902, just a year before *Elektra* was presented: 'Er [Goethe] sucht in dramatischen Gestaltungen nicht den dionysischen Genuß, gibt den Figuren vielmehr Idealität durch die Maske der stilisierten Sprache, entfernt sie von sich, verhängt ihnen ihr Gesicht.'[10] It is fair to conclude that Hofmannsthal would himself try to incorporate in his dramatic work what he thought was missing in Goethe's: 'den dionysischen Genuß'. His intention to write a diametrically different play from Goethe's *Iphigenie*, to create a new myth, is suggested in his following statement:

> [...] Verteidigung der Elektra - verteufelt human - Die Unterschiede sind ungeheuer. Dort der riesige Raum. Hier die Nußschale. [...] Dort ein Chor, der sang wie das Brausen der Brandung. Die Gestalt vergrößert. Ein einzelnes Armerecken unendlich bedeutungsvoll. Der Schauer des Mythos mit dem Meerwind herwehend, mit den Wolken oben hängend. Wir müssen uns den Schauer des Mythos *neu* schaffen. Aus dem Blut wieder Schatten aufsteigen lassen. [...] Wie Goethe überhaupt das Tragische fernlag.[11]

His ambition to change what he felt was wrong in Goethe's recreation of the Iphigeneia-theme in combination with his general admiration for Nietzsche and the fact that he referred to *Die Geburt der Tragödie* in his 'Vortrag über Goethes stilisierte Dramen' [12] indicate that the 'different image of Greece' he presented in his *Elektra* may be attributed to Nietzsche's theories about Greek tragedy.

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9 Hofmannsthal, *Aufzeichnungen*, p.335.
10 Hofmannsthal, *Aufzeichnungen*, p.437.
11 Hofmannsthal, *Aufzeichnungen*, p.443.
12 Hofmannsthal, *Aufzeichnungen*, pp.438-39.

Hölderlin (1770-1843), who was also fascinated with the Greek antiquity[13], spoke like Winckelmann of harmony and beauty when referring to his vision of Greece, but 'the ultimate source for his interpretation of these ideal values [was] not Greek sculpture, but Greek literature of the classical period especially Plato and Pindar.'[14] Silk and Stern also note that Hölderlin was aware of the fact that the harmony he spoke of was the product of opposing forces, and that he had detected 'the darker depths' of the Greek spirit:

> It can also be said that, unlike Winckelmann, Hölderlin has some intuitive appreciation of the Greek spirit's darker depths to which Nietzsche will later attach the name 'Dionysiac' - although Hölderlin gives them no such definition, and only in the last draft of his unfinished dramatic poem, *The Death of Empedocles*, do these depths receive a comparably urgent emphasis. (p.8)

E. M. Butler in her book *The Tyranny of Greece over Germany* mentions that Goethe's and Hölderlin's nobility and dignity were 'shattered by Heine [1795-1856], who unleashed a far more perilous enthusiasm than the one he destroyed by exalting the person of Dionysus.'[15] She also argues that Heine's lyric poetry had a tremendous influence on Nietzsche and that 'it was the hero of *The Gods in Exile* [1853] whom Nietzsche depicted so unforgettably in *The Birth of Tragedy* in 1872.' (p.308)

It seems that the tendency to break free from Winckelmann's idealistic concept of Greece was already in the air; Nietzsche, however, although influenced by both Hölderlin and Heine[16] was the first to declare his disagreement openly and to present his own

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[13] Silk and Stern mention that 'the passion of his life [...] was Greece', p.7.
[14] Silk and Stern, p.8.
[15] E. M. Butler, *The Tyranny of Greece over Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935), p.307.
[16] see Butler, *The Tyranny of Greece over Germany*, p.308.

revolutionary views in *Die Geburt der Tragödie*. For his part, Hofmannsthal was almost certainly in agreement with Nietzsche when he wrote his *Elektra* in 1903.

Although according to Nietzsche Greek tragedy is a synthesis of the Apolline and the Dionysian[17], it is obvious that Hofmannsthal in his modern version makes use almost solely of the Dionysian motif. *Elektra* is by no means a piece of escapistic art. The world presented here in all its gloom is the one 'behind the veil', which is probably the reason why Gerhart Hauptmann describes the play as non-Greek: Hofmannsthal is not interested in beautifying or covering up reality. He presents things as they are and not as they could have been. *Elektra* is in that sense certainly a Greek play. The difference is that the writer focuses his attention and his interest on what he regards as the most important characteristic of Greek existence, namely its awareness of tragedy, and treats the Apolline way of escapistic thinking as a secondary motif. In the last chapter of *Die Geburt der Tragödie* Nietzsche concludes: 'Hier zeigt sich das Dionysische, an dem Apollinischen gemessen, als die ewige und ursprüngliche Kunstgewalt, die überhaupt die ganze Welt der Erscheinung ins Dasein ruft.'(p.133) Silk and Stern explain this particular passage as follows:

> The Dionysiac is the basic ground of the world and the foundation of all existence. In the final analysis, it must be thought of as the eternal and original artistic power that calls into being the entire world of phenomena. The Apolline is secondary, the source of those illusions with which the Dionysiac world must, for our sakes, be transfigured. (p.88)

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[17] '[...] beide so verschiedne Triebe gehen nebeneinander her [...] bis sie endlich, durch einen metaphysischen Wunderakt des hellenischen "Willens", miteinander gepaart erscheinen und in dieser Paarung zuletzt das ebenso dionysische als apollinische Kunstwerk der attischen Tragödie erzeugen.', p.21.

It is likely that Hofmannsthal, who knew that Nietzsche regarded the Dionysian element as 'die ewige und ursprüngliche Kunstgewalt', deliberately gave his *Elektra* a profoundly Dionysian character.

The heroine Elektra appears and her macabre monologue, in which she addresses her dead father and uses the word *Blut* eight times, gives us a first impression of her emotional state. Hofmannsthal stresses the Dionysian character of this monologue even more by making Elektra's vision resemble an ecstatic, Dionysian ceremony:

Vater! dein Tag wird kommen! Von den Sternen
stürzt alle Zeit herab, so wird das Blut
aus hundert Kehlen stürzen auf dein Grab!
So wie aus umgeworfnen Krügen wirds
aus den gebundenen Mördern fließen, rings
wie Marmorkrüge werden nackte Leiber
von allen ihren Helfern sein, von Männern
und Frauen, und in einem Schwall, in einem
geschwollnen Bach wird ihres Lebens Leben
aus ihnen stürzen - und wir schlachten dir
die Rosse, die im Hause sind, wir treiben
sie vor dem Grab zusammen, und sie ahnen
den Tod und wiehern in die Todesluft
und sterben, und wir schlachten dir die Hunde,
weil sie der Wurf sind und der Wurf des Wurfes
von denen, die mit dir gejagt, von denen,
die dir die Füße leckten, denen du
die Bissen hinwarfst, darum muß ihr Blut

hinab, um dir zu Dienst zu sein, und wir,

dein Blut, dein Sohn Orest und deine Töchter,

wir drei, wenn alles dies vollbracht und Purpur-

gezelte aufgerichtet sind, vom Dunst

des Blutes, den die Sonne an sich zieht,

dann tanzen wir, dein Blut, rings um dein Grab. (p.191)[18]

One would expect that after this extremely intense scene the tension would slacken in a less emotional scene. But what follows is a tense dispute between the two sisters. Although Nietzsche clearly states 'Alles, was im apollinischen Teile der griechischen Tragödie, im Dialoge, [my underlining] auf die Oberfläche kommt, sieht einfach, durchsichtig, schön aus.'(p.55), the dialogue between the two sisters, as presented here, has none of the above mentioned characteristics. This might be another suggestion of Hofmannsthal's intention to eliminate the Apolline element and to give a Dionysian character to his tragedy. The same can be observed in the dialogue between Elektra and Klytämnestra which follows the previous scene.

Nietzsche introduced the terms 'Dionysian' and 'Apolline' mainly in order to present his theory about the genesis of Greek tragedy. The only instance where he applies these terms directly to a character is the case of the mythological figure Prometheus in Aischylos' homonymous tragedy: 'Der äschyleische Prometheus ist [...] eine dionysische Maske, während in jenem vorhin erwähnten tiefen Zuge nach Gerechtigkeit Äschylus seine väterliche Abstammung von Apollo, [...] dem Einsichtigen verrät.' (p.60) Silk and Stern note on this point: '[...] Prometheus is certainly a Dionysiac figure.' [my underlining] The *Aeschylean* Prometheus, however, expresses at the same time an Apolline demand for justice characteristic of its author. (p.72) Although Nietzsche did not

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[18] All quotations are taken from Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Elektra* in *Gesammelte Werke, Dramen II* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1979).

refer to any other mythological figures as Dionysian or Apolline, the above mentioned instance of Prometheus may suggest that an attempt to apply these characterizations to individual characters would not be totally unfounded, something that Maurice LaBelle also did in his article 'Dionysus and Despair: The Influence of Nietzsche upon O'Neill's Drama': 'The antithesis of Christine's Dionysianism is the Apollonianism which her daughter, Lavinia, epitomizes.'[19] In that sense it can be said that Hofmannsthal's Elektra is a Dionysian figure. She faces the tragic quality of her existence openly and appreciates it as such. She does have visions of the future, but her Dionysian element is so dominant, that even her dreams are saturated by it.

However, the most suggestive of a Dionysian nature element in Elektra's character is the collapse of individuality. Hofmannsthal stated in his notes about *Elektra*:

> In der 'Elektra' wird das Individuum in der empirischen Weise aufgelöst, indem eben der Inhalt seines Lebens es von innen her zersprengt, [my underlining] wie das sich zu Eis umbildende Wasser einen irdenen Krug. Elektra ist nicht mehr Elektra, weil sie eben ganz und gar Elektra zu sein sich weihte.[20]

Elektra thought that remembering the past and envisaging the future would enable her to remain Elektra, but has actually lost herself in the intoxication (*Rausch*) of her Dionysian visions. Hofmannsthal's note calls to mind Nietzsche's words about the shattering of the *principium individuationis*:

> Wenn wir [...] die wonnevolle Verzückung hinzunehmen, die bei demselben Zerbrechen des *principii individuationis* aus dem innersten

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[19] Maurice M. LaBelle: 'Dionysus and Despair: The Influence of Nietzsche upon O'Neill's Drama', *Educational Theatre Journal*, 25 (1973), 436-42 (p.440) See also my page 141.
[20] Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Aufzeichnungen*, p.461.

> Grunde des Menschen, [my underlining] ja der Natur emporsteigt, so tun wir einen Blick in das Wesen des *Dionysischen*, das uns am nächsten noch durch die Analogie des *Rausches* gebracht wird. (p.24)

The part of the play in which the Dionysian element is most prominent is the last scene. The dreadful deed has been executed by Orest, the brother who in Elektra's visions always appeared as the saviour. But Elektra has not participated in the actual act of revenge. She did not even remember to give her brother the axe she had been treasuring for years just for the moment of the execution. The tragicality of her life has reached its zenith, something that Hofmannsthal makes evident by creating an ecstatic, maenadic, Dionysian dance which ends with the heroine's death:

> *Elektra hat sich erhoben. Sie schreitet von der Schwelle herunter. Sie hat den Kopf zurückgeworfen wie eine Mänade. Sie wirft die Kniee, sie reckt die Arme aus, es ist ein namenloser Tanz, in welchem sie nach vorwärts schreitet.* (p.233)

The similarity between the image of the dancing Elektra and the following extract from *Die Geburt der Tragödie* is striking: ' Singend und tanzend äußert sich der Mensch als Mitglied einer höheren Gemeinsamkeit: er hat das Gehen und das Sprechen verlernt und ist auf dem Wege, tanzend in die Lüfte emporzufliegen.' (p.25)

Freud's Influence

It was thirty years after Friedrich Nietzsche's revolutionary views on Greek mythology and dramaturgy became known that certain mythological figures again became the centre of renewed interest, this time in the radical theory of a Viennese psychiatrist: Sigmund Freud.[21] Freud, apart from introducing psychoanalysis as a means of treating psychic diseases, also presented his own ideas in regard to certain forms of psychosis. According to his theory, some mental illnesses were essentially related to the sexual behaviour of the patient. Hysteria is the most common case. As an example that might support his theory he used the myth of King Oedipus. The tragic fate of the man who blinded himself after having realized that he had killed his father and married his own mother presented in intuitive poetic form the mental disorder which Freud later identified as the Oedipus-complex: the affection of a male child for his mother and his jealousy and rivalry towards his father. Freud first presented his analysis of *Oedipus Tyrannus* in the first edition of *Die Traumdeutung* in 1900, which he expanded further in his unfinished book *Abriß der Psychoanalyse* in 1938, where he also introduced the term Oedipus-complex. He also suggested that a similar phase can be observed in the development of girls: the attraction and devotion of a female child to her father and her extreme enmity towards her mother. In a critique of Freud and Psychoanalysis published in 1912 Jung gave to this phase the name Electra-complex[22], a term which was later also

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[21] E. M. Butler attributes the popularity of Freud's theories to his choice of mythological figures. She suggests: 'But there is an ironical significance in the fact, that had Freud not connected his theory of mental conflicts with Greek literature, he would almost certainly have caused little or no stir outside medical and scientific circles. Being a mythologist, he naturally appealed to mythology.' See Butler, 'Hofmannsthal's *Elektra*: A Graeco-Freudian Myth', p.166.

[22] C. G. Jung, *Collected Papers on Analytical Psychology*, trans. and ed. by Constance E. Long, (London: Baillière, Tindall and Cox, 1920), p.228.

used by Freud in his *Abriß der Psychoanalyse.*[23] Summarizing Freud's theories about the complexes, Jung concluded:

> We have to remember that almost all persons have at some time had infantile phantasies and habits exactly corresponding to those of a neurotic, but they do not become fixed to them; consequently, they do not become neurotic later on. The aetiological secret of the neurosis, therefore, does not consist in the mere *existence* of infantile phantasies, but lies in the so-called *fixation.* (p.228)

This conclusion, which, as Jung mentions, Freud reached through psychoanalysis seems to be of particular relevance to Elektra, the heroine of Hofmannsthal's play, in which a great number of Freudian elements can be observed.

The play starts with the discussion between the female slaves of the palace which according to some interpretations bears Freudian elements. Both E.M. Butler[24] and G. Bianquis[25] maintain that the slaves in the first scene are in an abnormal state of mind. Traumatized by the shocking experience of Agamemnon's murder and the violent repression forced on them by the murderers, they hate Elektra, who does not let them forget and go on with their lives. Their hatred towards her is evident in their words. Although it is undeniable that all the slaves but one detest Elektra, the view that they are suffering from a psychosis seems rather far-fetched. On the contrary, they are the ones who can and have forgotten, who have developed their lives by having given birth to

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[23] Sigmund Freud, *Abriß der Psychoanalyse, Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 1953), p.50. On Freud's interest in the Electra-complex Carol Diethe notes: 'Although Freud tentatively suggested the term "Electra-complex" as a female equivalent of the boy's "Oedipus-complex", his research in this area remained largely unsatisfactory, and even as late as 1933, Freud still admitted to being somewhat baffled by female sexuality'. See Carol Diethe, 'The Dance Theme in German Modernism', *German Life and Letters*, 44 (1991), 339-40, p.339.

[24] Butler, 'Hofmannsthal's *Elektra*: A Graeco-Freudian Myth', p.168.

[25] Geneviève Bianquis, *La poésie autrichienne de Hofmannsthal à Rilke* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1926), p.149.

children and who despise Elektra, who gives the impression of a mentally disturbed person. It might be more accurate to suggest that Hofmannsthal purposefully presents the group of the sane slaves in order to make his heroine appear even more tragic in comparison and to prepare his spectators for the following scene: for it is the following scene which can and must be interpreted from a Freudian point of view since in it Elektra presents her pathological fixation with her father.

Elektra, as introduced here, suffers from a severe abnormality. First of all, she talks to her dead father as if he were alive although she is constantly mindful that he has been assassinated. In addition, every word she utters refers to him. In her recollection of the past she talks of his murder, in her vision of the future she envisages the act of revenge. Elektra's case could be described as a neurosis which originated in an Electra-complex. As Jung notes: 'Not the mere existence of this complex [...] but the very strong attachment to it is what is typical of the neurotic. He is far more influenced by this complex than the normal person.' (pp.228-29) Her erotic attachment to her father caused her jealousy towards her mother, which was metamorphosed after her father's murder into a poisonous hatred and lust for revenge. Her bloody vision can be regarded as a creation of her sick mind. The ferocity and bloodthirstiness which characterize the vision, can hardly be emotions experienced by a mentally stable person.

Electra's macabre monologue is followed by her dispute with her sister Chrysothemis. The latter's behaviour could be described as a case of hysteria. Chrysothemis, the woman whose only goal is to be united with a man and to bear children, is driven insane by the realization that the possibility of her dream materializing is remote. Chrysothemis acts as a hysteric rather than a nymphomaniac when she shouts : *'Ich bin ein Weib und will ein Weiberschicksal!'*[26] (p.194) What started as a tendency

[26] E. M. Butler seems to favour the term nymphomaniac in reference to Chrysothemis, but I think that her case as presented in the play is far more serious than that.

towards sexual satisfaction and maternity has developed into a severe form of mental disease. Chrysothemis' fixation is as strong as her sister's. In the same way that Elektra can only have visions of revenge, Chrysothemis' mind is only capable of conceiving dreams of herself as a married woman and mother. And the realization that her reality contrasts sharply with her dream-world is the cause of her hysteria in the same way that Elektra's realization that her beloved father is dead and unavenged is responsible for her neurosis. It has been argued that Chrysothemis' case is not as severe as Elektra's.[27] It is normal for a woman to desire a 'woman's destiny' but not for a daughter to concentrate her attention solely on her father. Nevertheless, a closer study indicates that both sisters suffer from a mental disorder. Chrysothemis' mania has become so dominant that she only lives for her vision's sake. In the process of dreaming and imagining her *Weiberschicksal* she has lost herself, in the same way that Elektra has lost herself in the process of planning the revenge. The difference is that Chrysothemis' psychosis is mainly due to such causes as sexual abstention and unfulfilled maternal instincts. For her, Agamemnon, however sadly, is dead and gone and Orest is unlikely to return. The frustration of her sexual energy and maternal instincts seems pointless. Elektra's case is one of a different nature. Her attraction towards her father started as an abnormality and developed after his death into a pathological fixation. Whereas the cure for Chrysothemis' neurosis could simply be marriage - if Elektra allowed it - the only possible cure in Elektra's case would be matricide, executed by herself.

The conflict between Elektra and Klytämnestra is certainly the scene that most deserves to be described as purely Freudian: both characters suffer from a mental disorder and their debate strongly resembles a psycho-analytical session, the method of treating a

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[27] E. M. Butler suggests: 'The note of hysteria rises high as Chrysothemis details her longing for a husband and children and mentions bad dreams. But Electra's horror at these natural wishes shows that she is suffering from a far graver neurosis than the incipient nymphomania of her sister, as befits the hero of such a tragedy.' Butler 'Hofmannsthal's *Elektra*: A Graeco-Freudian Myth', p.169.

patient introduced by Freud and the Viennese school: the psychoanalyst leads the patient to 'open up' by gaining her trust. *'Träumst du, Mutter?'*, asks Elektra showing interest in her mother's ordeal, and Klytämnestra believes that her daughter possesses a form of power which could be useful to her: *'Aber du hast Worte. Du könntest vieles sagen, was mir nützt!'* (p.203) Klytämnestra, trusting her daughter, talks for the first time about what is troubling her mind. She speaks of the horrid nightmares which torment her every night: 'Clytemnestra now begins to talk volubly, wildly, incoherently, (what Freud calls freely).'[28] In the course of the dialogue Elektra forces her mother to a partial recollection of something she is trying to forget: Agamemnon's murder. 'This [Agamemnon's murder] is recollected, feverishly but incompletely, and covered up by those denials and protests which psychoanalysts know so well how to discount:

Bin ich denn noch,
die es getan? Und wenn! getan! getan!
Getan! was wirfst du mir da für ein Wort
in meine Zähne! Da stand er, von dem
du immer redest, da stand er und da
stand ich und dort Ägisth, und aus den Augen
die Blicke trafen sich: da war es doch
noch nicht geschehn! und dann veränderte
sich deines Vaters Blick im Sterben so
langsam und gräßlich, aber immer noch
in meinem hängend - und da wars geschehn:
dazwischen ist kein Raum! Erst wars vorher,
dann wars vorbei - dazwischen hab ich nichts

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[28] Butler, 'Hofmannsthal's *Elektra*: A Graeco-Freudian Myth', p.170.

getan! (p.206)

What occurs in the end is a common phenomenon in psychoanalysis: the patient suddenly realizes that she has been too carried away and has admitted to her psychoanalyst a number of things which give the latter a certain power over her, and she becomes hostile and aggressive.[29] The difference in *Elektra* is, of course, the fact that the 'psychoanalyst' is mentally unstable as well. Elektra makes use of the information she has received about her mother's fears not in order to help her, but to satisfy her own lust for revenge in a second macabre vision.

Another scene where Freud's influence can be observed is the one in which the shattered Elektra talks to her brother about her sacrifice, and about how she has given up her sexuality:

Ich bin nur mehr der Leichnam deiner Schwester,
mein armes Kind. Ich weiß, es schaudert dich
vor mir. Und war doch eines Königs Tochter!
Ich glaube, ich war schön: wenn ich die Lampe
ausblies vor meinem Spiegel, fühlte ich
mit keuschem Schauder, wie mein nackter Leib
vor Unberührtheit durch die schwüle Nacht
wie etwas Göttliches hinleuchtete.
Ich fühlte, wie der dünne Strahl des Monds
in seiner weißen Nacktheit badete
so wie in einem Weiher, und mein Haar
war solches Haar, vor dem die Männer zittern,

[29] 'A violent paroxysm of rage is the typically psychopathic result; great hostility towards the analyst; refusal to continue the treatment, and threats to extract the secret of the cure even with force if necessary.' See Butler, 'Hofmannsthal's *Elektra*: A Graeco-Freudian Myth', p.170.

dies Haar, versträhnt, beschmutzt, erniedrigt, dieses! (p.225)

It was her own choice to sacrifice her beauty and sexuality, and she is certainly conscious of having suppressed her femininity. What she is not conscious of, however, is that her femininity has not been completely erased from her nature. It has remained latent in her subconscious. The moment she sees a man, even if it is her own brother, or maybe because it is her own brother and reminds her of her father, her subconsciousness gains power over her, her suppressed femininity (which she despises in Chrysothemis and scorns in her mother) now becomes so dominant that it explodes in the form of grief. For the first time she goes so deeply into analysing her fixation about her father that she approaches it from a sexual angle: *'Diese süßen Schauder/ hab ich dem Vater opfern müssen. Meinst du,/ wenn ich an meinem Leib mich freute, drangen/ nicht seine Seufzer, drang sein Stöhnen nicht/ bis an meinem Bette?'* (p.225) In her sick mind Elektra regarded her femininity as something belonging to her father; he had control over her sexual behaviour. This is the reason why after his death she thought that he was demanding the sacrifice of her female nature out of jealousy, that he forced her to take the personified hatred as her lover, so that she, appalled by the horridness of the encounter, would renounce her sexuality for ever. The bitterness in her voice while talking to her brother and her feeling of shame in front of him because of her unpleasant looks are rooted in the theory that no matter how hard human beings may try to suppress their libido, it will always come to the surface, sooner or later, most probably in the form of a psychosis. Elektra has tried hard to bury her sexual needs inside her as an act of honour and duty towards her father. Nevertheless, her suppressed nature erupts at the sight of a man.[30]

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[30] As Hugo Wyss notes: 'Darin liegt wohl die Tragik der sonderbaren Emanzipation Elektras, daß sie das Gegenteil erreicht durch die Vermännlichung nämlich die ihres Sinnes beraubte Verweiblichung: die Sexualisierung. Sie will die Sachlichkeit und Freiheit, und kommt zur Voreingenommenheit und

Sigmund Freud - Josef Breuer:

Studies on Hysteria

Tracing a word back to its origins usually provides its most accurate interpretation. The fact that the word hysteria derives from the Greek word *hystera* (ustera) - meaning womb - is of course suggestive of its link with the natural functions of the female body and thus with sexuality.[31] In their preface to the first edition of their book *Studies on Hysteria*, Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer openly refer to the role of sexuality as a major factor for the pathogenesis of hysteria, although their discretion towards their patients prevented them from citing examples which would clearly establish the relation between sexual behaviour and hysteria:

> It would be a grave breach of confidence to publish material of this kind, with the risk of the patients being recognized and their acquaintances becoming informed of facts which were confined only to the physician. It has therefore been impossible for us to make use of some of the most instructive and convincing of our observations. This of course applies especially to all these cases in which sexual and marital relations play an impotant aetiological part. Thus it comes about that we are only able to produce very incomplete evidence in favour of our view that sexuality seems to play a principal part in the pathogenesis of hysteria as a source of psychical traumas, and as a motive for 'defence' - that is for repressing ideas from consciousness.[32]

Versklavung. Diese Verzerrung ihres Wesens macht Elektra zur Hysterikerin.' See Hugo Wyss, *Die Frau in der Dichtung Hofmannsthals*, (Zürich: Niemeyer, 1954), p.54.

[31] Although all the patients in the case histories mentioned in *Studies of Hysteria* are women, Freud, following Charcot, suggested that men suffer from hysteria too.

[32] Sigmund Freud - Josef Breuer, *Studies on Hysteria*, trans. by James and Alix Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), p.47.

Through numerous observations Breuer (who employed the method of hypnosis as a means of treating cases of hysteria) and Freud (who made use of Breuer's observations as the basis for his psycho-analytical theories) arrived at the conclusion that hysteria is a form of neurosis essentially caused by severe psychic traumas which have taken place in the past. The symptoms of the disease are mainly somatic (severe pains, paralysis, deafness, anorexia, etc.) and here lies the difficulty of attributing the aetiology of hysteria to psychic traumas. These psychic traumas, in which the disorder originates, are very often caused by external events and particularly ones which have occured in the childhood of the patient. As Freud and Breuer put it:

> In traumatic neuroses the operative cause of the illness is not the trifling physical injury but the affect of fright - the psychical trauma. In an analogous manner, our investigations reveal, for many, if not for most, hysterical symptoms precipitating causes which can only be described as psychical traumas. (p.56)

It is also very frequent that the patients either completely forget the event which caused the psychic trauma, or suppress it because of its embarrassing nature, so that eventually it is erased from their conscious memory.

And this is the point where Breuer brought about a revolution in the field of psychiatry: he suggested that hysteria could be cured by forcing the patient to recall and describe in every detail the event in which the psychic trauma is rooted. This he achieved through the means of hypnosis: 'Not until they have been questioned under hypnosis do these memories emerge with the undiminished vividness of a recent event.' (p.60)
The results of the method of hypnosis were astonishing:

> For we found, to our great surprise at first, that each individual hysterical symptom immediately and permanently disappeared when we had succeeded in bringing clearly to light the memory of the event by which it was provoked and in arousing its accompanying effect, and when the patient had described that event in the greatest possible detail and had put the effect into words. (p.57)

The extent to which the patient has reacted against the traumatizing event is also of significance:

> The injured person's reaction only exercises a completely 'cathartic' effect if it is an adequate reaction - as, for instance, revenge. But language serves as a substitute for action, by its help an effect can be 'abreacted' almost as effectively. (p.59)

If for a certain reason the patient suppresses the memory of the event (for instance when it is of a sexual nature) the trauma is never externalized, 'abreacted', and the hysterical phenomena which occur are extremely severe:

> It may therefore be said that the ideas which have become pathological have persisted with such freshness and affective strength because they have been denied the normal wearing-away processes by means of abreaction and reproduction in states of uninhibited association. (p.62)

Through their observations Breuer and Freud also reached the conclusion that hysteria bears similarities to the disorder known as *double consciousness*, the splitting of consciousness. This explains why, although hysteria is a form of severe psychosis, there may be found among hysterics people of the clearest intellect, strongest will, greatest

character and highest critical ability. It can be said that hysterics have two personalities. While they are in their *normal* state (which resembles the waking state of a mentally healthy human being) they are characterized by the qualities stated above. But when they are in their *hypnoid* state (resembling an ordinary sleep) they are as insane as everybody in their dreams. Whereas, however, our *dream-psychoses* have no effect upon our waking life, the products of hypnoid states intrude into waking life in the form of hysterical symptoms.

Finally, Breuer and Freud refer to how easily a hysteric fit can be caused:

> An attack will occur spontaneously, just as memories do in normal people; it is however possible to provoke one just as any memory in accordance with the laws of association. It can be provoked either by stimulation of a hysterogenic zone or by a new experience which sets it going owing to a similarity with the pathogenic experience. (p.67)

The patient eventually reaches a point where everything he experiences functions as a reminder of his psychic trauma and the hysteric symptoms take over his phases of normality. Thus, it is very difficult to distinguish between the original event which initiated the trauma and its reproductions in the mind of the patient. Breuer again suggested hypnosis during which the hysteric symptoms are dealt with and 'removed layer after layer' until one finally reaches the heart of the problem, the initial cause of the illness.

These impressive discoveries and revolutionary theories caused a great stir in the intellectual circles of the time. Hence, it is rather unlikely that Hugo von Hofmannsthal was not influenced by Freud's and Breuer's work. In his article 'Elektra und Ödipus. Hofmannsthals Erneuerung der Antike für das Theater Max Reinhardts' Wolfgang Nehring gives the following evidence which supports this assumption:

> Wir wissen, daß sich Hofmannsthal im Jahre 1902 oder 1903 das Buch von Hermann Bahr ausleihen wollte (BII 142) und daß er es später auch besaß. In dem schon oft zitierten Brief an Emil Hladny bestätigt er, daß er 'damals', nämlich als er *Elektra* konzipierte, in den *Studien* [*Studies on Hysteria*] 'geblättert' habe. (BII 384).[33]

A question that rises automatically after the first reading of Hofmannsthal's *Elektra* is whether the main character is a hysteric as described in Freud's and Breuer's theory. A comparison between Elektra's case and the case histories cited in *Studies on Hysteria* may lead to the conclusion that Elektra is as hysteric as Freud's and Breuer's patients. In the theoretical part of his book Breuer stresses the importance of the abreaction of a psychic trauma. A psychic trauma which has been abreacted (for instance through revenge) usually fades away after a while and does not cause any hysteric symptoms. But a psychic trauma which has never emerged to the surface persists as a memory for a long time and 'drags' the patient back to the time when it had originally taken place.

This is a most accurate description of Elektra's state. The severe psychic trauma she had suffered has not yet been abreacted, the desired act of revenge has not been committed. Therefore, it is so dominant in Elektra's memory that she actually lives in that memory: *'Ich kann nicht vergessen!'* (p.195) She talks about revenge all the time in an attempt to abreact her trauma, but its severity makes this way of abreaction insufficient: an act is required.

Another important point is the cause of the trauma. Breuer believed that external events determine the pathology of hysteria. This corresponds perfectly with Elektra's

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[33] Wolfgang Nehring, 'Elektra und Ödipus. Hofmannsthals Erneuerung der Antike für das Theater Max Reinhardts' in *Hugo von Hofmannsthals Freundschaften und Begegnungen mit Zeitgenossen*, ed. by Ursula Renner and G. Bärbel Schmidt (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1991), pp. 123-42, (pp.133-34).

case. Her hysteria originated in an external event which occurred in her childhood: Agamemnon's murder traumatized Elektra's personality so deeply that it initiated her hysterical state.

The symptoms of hysteria are mainly somatic. However, one of the most frequent symptoms are the horrific hallucinations the patients experience of being metamorphosed into a monstrous creature, usually an animal. Breuer's first patient, for instance, Fräulein Anna O., often had a terrifying hallucination of her arm becoming a snake: 'and when she looked at it [her arm] the fingers turned into little snakes, with death's heads (the nails).' (p.93) Elektra is often described by the maids as an animal: *'Giftig wie eine wilde Katze.'* (p.187) *'Sie fängt an der Wand des Hauses, seitwärts der Türschwelle, eifrig zu graben an, lautlos, wie ein Tier.'* (p.219) More importantly, she also describes herself as an animal. This transformation could be regarded as a symptom of hysteria.[34]

Even more suggestive of a hysteric nature are Elektra's trances, her hypnoid states. In an abnormal state of mind Elektra describes in every detail the act of revenge. It is obvious that her hypnoid state, expressed in her bloodthirsty visions, is present all the time. Another hysterical phenomenon is the fact that the patient is constantly reminded of the event which caused the psychic trauma even by externally irrelevant incidents. A characteristic instance of that is Elektra's reaction to Chrysothemis' raising her hands: a gesture which to a normal person would appear natural and insignificant, is in Elektra's case a reminder of Agamamenon's assassination, the origin of the hysteria: *'Was hebst du die Hände?/ So hob der Vater seine beiden Hände,/ da fuhr das Beil hinab und spaltete/ sein Fleisch.'* (p.192)

Breuer suggested hypnosis as a way of treating cases of hysteria. After the patients had talked about the hysterogenic incident, which was often hidden deep down in

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[34] Lorna Martens attempts a comparison between *Elektra* and the case history of Breuer's patient Anna O. in her article 'The Theme of Repressed Memory in Hofmannsthal's *Elektra*', *The German Quarterly*, 60 (1987), 38-51.

their memory, they usually felt more tranquil and to a certain extent relieved. Elektra puts herself in a state of hypnosis: the trance during which she talks about Agamemnon's murder, completely isolating her from reality. After her psychic 'explosion' she may not be absolutely calm but she is at least in the condition to comprehend what is going on around her, to communicate with her sister and respond as logically as her general disordered state permits.

Freud and Breuer also draw attention to the significant relation between hysteria and sexuality. In most cases they investigated, the essence of the hysteria was sexual, something that all the patients stubbornly refused to admit even under hypnosis. Not until persistently questioned by the analyst did they reveal the well hidden pathogenetic factor known to them all along and always of a sexual nature. Frau Emmy von N.'s disease, as Freud directly states, was related to her long sexual abstinence, Miss Lucy R.'s originated in her desperate and unfulfilled love for her employer, Katharina's in the sexual abuse she had suffered from her father, Fräulein Elisabeth von R.'s in her love for her sister's husband. (pp.73-202) All these women, as they admitted later, suspected from the start the cause of their disease, but had to be made aware of it. In all cases the analyst had immense difficulties in extracting this knowledge from them.

Elektra's case is in many ways similar. She is not only suffering from sexual abstinence, she has also suppressed her sexual desire and needs so much that she believes that she has eventually succeeded in giving up her femininity. The reason for this extreme form of suppression is the fact that her lust was directed towards her father, which after his death was transformed into a strong desire for vengeance. Orest, the man who like the analyst comes from outside and plays the role of the listener, gains Elektra's confidence. She, who all the time was talking of nothing but revenge as her filial duty to the memory of her murdered father, now refers for the first time to a subject she had never mentioned

before: her grief over her lost sexuality which she connects with the death of her father. When the object of her sexual phantasies, her father, died, her femininity died with him.

The elements of Freud's and Breuer's theory about hysteria in *Elektra* are too many to be coincidental and clearly show that Hofmannsthal's Elektra can be regarded as hysteric. However, Hofmannsthal's intention was not to present a tragedy based exclusively on psychiatric theories. Moreover, he combined Freud's and Breuer's scientific findings with many of the beliefs and trends of the era, and also his personal ideas (such as his concept of 'pre-existence') and created what Wolfgang Nehring called 'ein lebendiges Theaterstück':

> Hofmannsthal wollte nicht die Griechen neu interpretieren oder moderne psychologische Theorien dramatisieren, sondern ein lebendiges Theaterstück schreiben, in dem gegenwärtige Menschen mit ihrem Fühlen, ihrem Denken und ihrer Einbildungskraft die symbolische Wirklichkeit des Lebens wiedererkennen. [35]

[35] Nehring, 'Elektra und Ödipus. Hofmannsthals Erneuerung der Antike für das Theater Max Reinhardts', p.136.

The problem of pre-existence

Pre-existence (Präexistenz) is a term introduced by Hofmannsthal and refers to a certain phase of a human being's life. During this phase a human being lives in complete isolation and possesses a form of wisdom which enables him to feel self-sufficient, content and secure. The basic characteristic of this state is the absolute lack of any kind of development or even the slightest modification: 'Die Präexistenz kennt weder Variation noch Metamorphosen, sie ruht in sich, wer in ihr lebt, ist sich selbst genug.'[36], notes Walter Jens. This premature and primitive wisdom fills man with a feeling of strength, something that Hofmannsthal describes as very dangerous indeed.[37] For the man who already perceives himself as satisfied with his present state does not feel the urge to advance to a higher stage and is therefore exposed to the peril of never experiencing the phase of 'real' existence. According to Hofmannsthal, the power and knowledge possessed in pre-existence should only function as a means of motivation for man to pass on to this far more important stage of existence. Furthermore, it is damaging for a man to carry with him into existence his knowledge acquired in pre-existence: everything should be left behind and man, a *tabula rasa*, should start all over again and through numerous metamorphoses try to gain back the wisdom and contentment he has given up.[38] The essential difference is that this new condition will be permanent and fulfilling: the man will not just have a feeling of strength; he will be truly powerful. The crossing from the one state to the other presents a major difficulty and is the most important point in everyone's life. During that period man does not belong anywhere; the state he is in can neither be defined as *being* - for that would imply that he is still in pre-existence - nor as

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[36] Walter Jens, *Hofmannsthal und die Griechen* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1955), p.18.
[37] ' Praeexistenz. Glorreicher, aber gefährlicher Zustand', Hugo von Hofmannsthal, 'ad me ipsum', *Die Neue Rundschau* 65 (1954), 358-82, p.358.
[38] Jens, p.21.

becoming - for that would indicate that he has already entered developing existence. In this vital stage man must make use of all his will-power so that he will proceed and not stay trapped for ever in a phase of transition.

Hofmannsthal suggests three possible ways of reaching existence. First of all he indicates the execution of a *deed* as a possibility:

> Im Augenblick der Tat zersprengt der Mensch die Hülle der Präexistenz und findet, indem er sich zu seinem Wege bekennt und Treue zeigt, das ihm aufgegebene Schicksal. [...] Durch die Tat läßt er sich auf das Kräftesspiel innerhalb der Welt des Werdens ein und wird selbst, der Verwandelte, zum Verwandler und Beweger der Dinge.[39]

He also mentions metamorphosis through a *child* or *work*: 'Aber nicht nur die Tat, auch die Aufgabe des eigenen Ich zugunsten des Werks und des Kindes führen den Opfernden zu jenem höheren Selbst das er am greifbarsten in der Verwandlung durch die Liebe erfährt.' (p.22.)

The motif of pre-existence was already pre-dominant in the early work of Hofmannsthal; *Elektra* is no exception. Hans-Joachim Newiger suggests that 'Hofmansnthal [versuchte] in *Elektra* den Übergang aus der Präexistenz in das Leben, soweit es ihm damals möglich war, darzustellen.'[40] All the characters of the play are either trapped in an eternal pre-existence or struggling to find their way into existence. In the character of Elektra Hofmannsthal presents the biggest antinomy of the play. Elektra has acquired a certain knowledge during her period of pre-existence: the memory of her father's assassination. This knowledge (although it certainly does not make her feel

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[39] As quoted in Jens, p.21.
[40] Hans-Joachim Newiger, 'Hofmannsthals Elektra und die griechische Tragödie', *Arcadia*, 4 (1969), 138-63, p.155.

content) gives her the power of showing her opposition and hatred towards Klytämnestra and Ägisth. She is also aware of the fact that the only way to existence is through performing a deed, which to her means avenging her father's death.[41] Nevertheless, in order to be capable of performing a deed, she must forget, something she stubbornly refuses to do: *'Ich bin kein Vieh, ich kann nicht vergessen!'* (p.195) She wishes to pass from pre-existence into existence without going through a transitional phase, she wishes to be transferred from the past into the future without experiencing the present. Furthermore, she wishes to carry with her into the future the knowledge and power she possesses from her pre-existence: she is not prepared to give anything up, least of all herself. Therefore, it is impossible for her to advance into the world of existence, simply because she has condemned herself to ceaseless imprisonment in the sphere of pre-existence: 'Tun ist Sich-aufgeben. Tun heisst sich verwandeln. Elektra aber ist im beharrenden, alles voraus festlegenden Geiste verkrampft. Ihre Bewusstheit tötet die Tat.'[42]

Klytämnestra is a character who has almost acquired existence. She has been a mother and she has performed a deed, even if that was a cruel murder. But at the vital point when she was about to be transferred into existence, she suddenly decided to give up both the elements necessary for her transmission: her motherhood and her deed. As Wolfgang Nehring puts it:

> Eine Frau aber hat wirklich gehandelt. [...] Klytämnestra ermordete mit Ägisths Hilfe ihren Gatten, den Vater ihrer Kinder. [...] Die Frevlerin ist den Folgen der Untat nicht gewachsen. Sie vergaß die Macht des

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[41] On this point Elizabeth Steingruber mentions: 'In ihr [Elektra] kommen die beiden Taten, die Pole [Agamemnon's murder, the act of vengeance on Klytämnestra] zwischen denen das Drama sich bewegt, zusammen.' Elizabeth Steingruber, *Hugo von Hofmannsthals Sophokleische Dramen* (Winterthur: Keller, 1959), p.83.

[42] Steingruber, p.85.

> Gewissens, die Sühne, die auf die Frevel gesetzt ist. Der Mord an Agamemnon macht sie nicht für eine angenehme Zukunft mit ihrem Liebhaber frei. Klytämnestra zerbricht an der Tat. [...] Klytämnestra will sich nicht mit ihrer Tat identifizieren.[43]

Hence she could not go back into pre-existence as it was completely erased from her mind or proceed into existence either because of the loss of the appropriate means (motherhood - deed). However, she had already made a step forwards, she had entered the transitional tunnel where she is destined to stay for ever, in a present without past and without future, unless she decides to recall her past in order to be able to step into her future.

Chrysothemis, the third female character of the play, is prepared to delete her pre-existence (Agamemnon's murder) from her memory and to pass via motherhood - the only deed allowed to her by her female nature - to existence, which to her means a woman's destiny: *'Ich bin ein Weib und will ein Weiberschicksal.'* (p.189) However, like her sister, she is trapped in the sphere of pre-existence not of her own free will but under the dominating influence of Elektra. She knows very well where she comes from, where she wishes to go and how to reach her goal; but Elektra does not allow her to make any move. The only thing she would allow Chrysothemis to do is to assist her to punish Agamemnon's murderers; but this Chrysothemis cannot do. Her female-maternal nature is so strong that it forbids her to kill her own mother: ' Der Mord an der Mutter und die Sehnsucht nach eigener Mutterschaft haben nicht Raum in einem Herzen. Sie schließen sich gegenseitig aus.'[44] Elektra, on the other hand, desperately tried to forget that she was born a woman because in her mind womanhood is associated with Klytämnestra and her

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[43] Wolfgang Nehring, *Die Tat bei Hofmannsthal. Eine Untersuchung zu Hofmannsthals großen Dramen* (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung. 1966), pp.44-45.
[44] Nehring, *Die Tat bei Hofmannsthal*, p.43.

detestable deed. Elektra believes that she can kill her mother; her female nature has been sacrificed long ago.[45] The tragic heroine stands even further away from existence than she herself knows. She cannot act, for she cannot forget, and she cannot have a child as she herself has slaughtered her female nature: she has completely disconnected herself from existence: 'Elektra scheitert vor der Tat. Sie will nicht Frau sein, kann aber nicht zum Mann und Täter werden. Ihrem eigenen Leben bleibt jede Selbstverwirklichung versagt.'[46]

In antithesis to the three female characters, Hofmannsthal presents Orest as the man who acts.[47] The elements Orest carries from pre-existence are being an outsider, his not having shared the family curse, and purity and innocence. But he comes back determined to act, determined to gain his existence. Orest has to be Agamemnon's son and not a weak child. He kills the assassins and at the same time gives himself up: he enters the dark backyard of the living curse and leaves behind his innocence: 'Orest gibt sich, als er Klytämnestra erschlägt, völlig dem Gesetz der Rache hin. Er muß, um die aufgetragene Tat zu tun, die Unschuld seiner Jugend preisgeben.'[48] No matter how painful it may have been, he did not retreat. His will to come into existence was overwhelming. The deed his destiny had chosen for him to perform was matricide; after having executed it he emerges as the victor and steps into existence.

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[45] Nehring notes: 'Ist Klytämnestra wenigstens, *bevor* sie ihren Gatten erschlug Frau und Mutter gewesen, so mußte Elektra ihr Frauentum wie jedes andere Glück dem Rachegedanken aufopfern.', *Die Tat bei Hofmannsthal*, p.45.
[46] Nehring, *Die Tat bei Hofmannsthal*, p.46.
[47] *'Der ist selig der tuen darf!* [...] So preist Elektra ihren Bruder Orest, der kommt, im das Verbrechen der Klytämnestra zu rächen: den Täter preist sie. In diesen Versen ist das Thema der Tragödie ausgesprochen: die Tat.', Steingruber, p.82.
[48] Nehring, *Die Tat bei Hofmannsthal*, p.88.

The language crisis (*Sprachkrise*)

Hofmannsthal's short prose with the title 'Ein Brief'[49], which appeared in August 1902 is considered to be the most characteristic expression of the *language-crisis* that was one of the most influential factors in the author's work. 'Ein Brief' is an imaginary letter written by Lord Chandos to Francis Bacon, in which the young lord, who in the past had produced an impressive number of literary works and had also ambitious dreams for his future production, describes his inability to express his feelings and ideas in either oral or written form and in either English or Latin. The inadequacy of language goes so far that he cannot even think in it anymore. On the contrary, he feels that many things he used never to think about in the past have suddenly taken on a different meaning: commonplace things he used never to notice have suddenly become important and meaningful, as if he were not conceiving images with his senses and comprehending them with his mind, but rather experiencing the world with his heart and interpreting it with his emotions. However, the more strongly he feels that all these things around him are trying to communicate with him, the more aware he grows of the feebleness of linguistic expression, although he himself is willing to share his newly acquired wisdom with his family and friends. This realization leads him to the decision never to write again:

> Ich fühlte in diesem Augenblick mit einer Bestimmtheit, die nicht ganz ohne ein schmerzliches Beigefühl war, daß ich auch im kommenden und im folgenden und in allen Jahren dieses meines Lebens kein englisches und kein lateinisches Buch schreiben werde. (p.472)

He goes on to justify his decision thus:

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[49] Hugo von Hofmannsthal, 'Ein Brief', in *Gesammelte Werke* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1979)

> und dies aus dem einen Grund, dessen mir peinliche Seltsamkeit mit ungeblendetem Blick dem vor Ihnen harmonisch ausgebreiteten Reiche der geistigen und leiblichen Erscheinungen an seiner Stelle einzuordnen ich Ihrer unendlichen geistigen Überlegenheit überlasse: nämlich weil die Sprache, in welcher nicht nur zu schreiben sondern auch zu denken mir vielleicht gegeben wäre, weder die lateinische noch die englische noch die italienische und spanische ist, sondern eine Sprache in welcher die stummen Dinge zu mir sprechen, und in welcher ich vielleicht einst im Grabe von einem unbekannten Richter mich verantworten werde. (p.472)

The critic Werner Kraft in his book *Der Chandos-Brief und andere Aufsätze über Hofmannsthal* refers to the much discussed opinion that the fictitious character Lord Chandos is the literary incarnation of Hofmannsthal himself and that behind the character the letter is addressed to, Francis Bacon, is hidden the personality of Stefan George.[50] A letter written by Hofmannsthal to George in December 1902, a few months after 'Ein Brief' had appeared, may indeed justify this opinion:

> Es waren darunter Wochen der unglaublichsten inneren Erstarrung [...] daß ich darüber - ich glaube es fest, so sonderbar es klingt - die Fähigkeit selbst kurze Gedichte zu machen, verloren habe. Es waren Tage der schlimmsten Angst [...] Tage der inneren Fülle, nicht Tage sondern Wochen, nun beinahe Monate der anhaltenden Arbeitsfähigkeit, des gesteigerten schönen inneren Lebens. Wie freue ich mich, nun wieder zu Ihnen zu sprechen, wie froh denke ich nun daran, Ihnen wieder unter die

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[50] Werner Kraft, *Der Chandos Brief und andere Aufsätze über Hofmannsthal* (Darmstadt: Agora, 1977).

Augen zu treten, nicht als ein Leichnam vor den Lebendigen mich hinzuschieben.[51]

Undoubtedly, there are similarities between the two letters, and it is undeniable that Hofmannsthal must have gone through the same anxiety as Lord Chandos. Nonetheless, Hofmannsthal did not refrain from writing. On the contrary he began writing even more feverishly than before and searching for his literary path not only in poetry and short prose, but in drama as well. Lord Chandos has chosen silence until the desired language reveals itself to him. Hofmannsthal, equally aware of the weakness of language, started exploring the possibility of employing other means of expression, such as gestures, colours, musical motifs, dance, until he reached a stage where these factors were more essential for the work than the actual language. The creation of Lord Chandos was based on Hofmannsthal's personal doubts about the expressive ability of language. That, nevertheless, does not make the character autobiographical.

Elektra was written during the period when Hofmannsthal became acutely aware of the weakness of language as an expressive means and it bears frequent traces of the author's insecurity about words.[52] First of all, direct references to the inadequacy of language are made throughout the play. Secondly, Hofmannsthal seeks and borrows ways of expression from other kinds of art such as music and dance, which reinforces the opinion that in this particular period verbal expression must have seemed to him very problematic indeed.

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[51] Hugo von Hofmannsthal - Stefan George, *Briefwechsel* (Munich: Kupper, 1953), p.173

[52] Herman Doswald notes: *'Elektra* was the first play Hofmannsthal completed for the theater after the Chandos-crisis of 1901, and it reflects perhaps better than any other play his conscious concern with the use of nonverbal expression as a supplement to verbal communication', See Herman K. Doswald, 'Nonverbal expression in Hofmannsthal's *Elektra*', *The Germanic Review*, 44 (1969), 199-210, p.200.

The first characteristic instance of verbal inadequacy is Elektra's first big monologue.[53] In this rather long passage - especially if the shortness of the whole one-act play is considered - Elektra refers to her father's murder and has a wild vision of the act of revenge on the two asssassins. One immediately becomes aware of the fact that Elektra talks too much and that what she says consists of hollow words. She has neither a clear idea nor a definite plan of the desired act of punishment. Her vision is so violent and saturated with blood that the reader may find himself wondering whether she is to be taken seriously. Her words can be regarded more as the outburst of a neurotic woman than the plan of a daughter avenging her father's death. It is obvious that the playwright wished to create this effect. His intention was to present a character who talks about the deed but eventually cannot find the energy required to perform it. Elektra can talk; and she can talk a great deal. But her talking resembles the barking of a dog who looks dangerous but is too frightened to attack its enemy.

The second reference to the unimportance of language is even more direct: *'Was willst du? Rede, sprich, ergieße dich,/ dann geh und laß mich!'* (p.192) Elektra seems to despise her sister and what she has to say. The words *rede*, *sprich*, *ergieße dich* are treated as synonyms with an evident negative sense. Furthermore, Elektra's wish to be left alone indicates her apathy to what her sister may have to tell her. The effect is even more striking as this indifference towards spoken language is shown by a person who herself does nothing but talk. It seems that language for Elektra has lost its communicative quality: she does not use it in order to communicate with her sister. She even goes so far as to scorn it. She regards it only as a verbal expression of her own unfulfilled visions.

Chrysothemis appears to react in the same way to her sister's words: *'Hör auf! Dies ist alles vorbei. Hör auf!'* (p.196) To Chrysothemis Elektra's obsession with talking

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[53] Although this monologue is very expressive and displays Elektra's inner feelings, it is ineffective, ('inadequate') as it fails to have any impact on the world, as opposed to the effect of action.

about the past seems a meaningless, superfluous repetition of something that is already over. All she wants is to live in the present and forget once and for all the incident which has taken place in the past and poisoned her life so much. Elektra's vain talking cannot achieve anything apart from keeping her imprisoned.

The vanity of words is also implied in Klytämnestra's intention to speak to her daughter: *'Ich will mit ihr reden!'* (p.199) She vaguely hopes that Elektra's words will be able to save her from her horrific nightmares, or at least pacify her tortured mind: *'Hast du nicht andre Worte, mich zu trösten?'* (p.202) She is so deceived by Elektra's ability to talk that she regards it as the only way out of her misery: *'Aber du hast Worte.'* (p.203) Her insane fear has made her so superstitious that she even believes words have a malignant power: *'Von ihm zu reden hab ich dir verboten.'* (p.207) Even the mere mention of Orest's name fills Klytämnestra with terror. But apart from their destructive power Klytämnestra is convinced that words also possess a benevolent quality: *'Und aus dir bring ich so oder so das rechte Wort.'* (p.208) Her insistence on her daughter's therapeutic talking provokes Elektra's second vision-monologue which intensifies the tragic position of both mother and daughter. For Klytämnestra her daughter's words are not her acquittal, as she was hoping, but her death warrant. And Elektra finds herself entangled in yet another series of meaningless, bloodthirsty visions, which do not even have the desired effect: the anticlimax of the news about Orest's death destroys instantly any scaring effect Elektra's words might have had on Klytämnestra. Her words were particularly chosen in order to drive Klytämnestra insane with fear. And yet the expression of triumph and relief on her mother's face makes evident to Elektra the failure of her attempt. Although she is convinced by her mother's facial expression that something has happened to please the queen, she cannot bring herself to believe Chrysothemis' words that Orest is dead. Her mother's expression has such convincing power that words seem to fail to create the same effect: *'Niemand kanns wissen: denn es*

ist nicht wahr./ ich sag dir doch! ich sag dir,/ es ist nicht wahr!/ [...] Es ist nicht wahr!' (p.211) But in the end she is forced to believe Chrysothemis' information, and this is such a shock that she instantly recognizes the uselessness of words and decides to act. Her transformation begins with her doubting the importance of words when Chrysothemis begs her to go and talk to the two men who delivered the news about their brother's death: *'Was frommt noch zu wissen? daß er tot ist, wissen wir.'* (p.214) For the first time she mentions a plan: *'Schweig still. Zu sprechen ist nichts./ Nichts gibt es zu bedenken, als nur wie?/ Wie wir es tun?'* (p.215) But her metamorphosis does not last long. When the real avenger appears she returns to her old self and bursts into endless talk about her former happiness and present misery, in comparison to which her brother, who is prepared to act, says almost nothing apart from what is essential for the plan.[54] She almost endangers the plan with her uncontrollable talking. Over and over again her brother and his companion have to warn her to keep silent: *'Still, Elektra, still!'* (p.228) One of the most tragic scenes is the one of Elektra, boiling with hatred, and left to herself while her brother performs the deed. She has spent her whole life talking about revenge, yet in the crucial moment she is as useless as her vain words.

[54] Steingruber notes on this point: ' Elektra, die so unaufhörlich und angestrengt redet, sucht das fehlende Leben durch Worte zu ersetzen. Orest aber besitzt die Lebenskraft, und sicher und fest und einfach gehen die Worte aus ihm, aus einem Lebensgrund, hervor und werden Taten.', p.93

Other means of expression

The major section of evidence that now follows shows how Hofmannsthal overcame his language crisis in *Elektra* by the use of other means of communication.

Musical Motifs; Overture Technique

The term *Overture* can be defined as a piece of instrumental music composed as an introduction to an opera, oratorio or similar work. The early operas and oratorios (in the years around 1600) had either no instrumental introduction at all or just a mere flourish of trumpets or other very brief calls-to-attention. But soon this was felt to be insufficient for the preparation of the listener, and as opera and oratorio developed and became more definitely organized, the introduction developed with them, until it became a standard form. However, it was realized that there was no connection between the introduction and the main part of the opera, which it was supposed to be introducing. The innovation in that field is attributed to the German composer Christoph Willibald von Gluck (1714-87), who prefaced his later operas with an overture designed to prepare the audience for the plot and introduce them to the general atmosphere of the play. To achieve that, he often let his overture, instead of coming to a full stop, merge into the beginning of the first Act.

Hofmannsthal made use of this technique but also went a step further. The introductory scene of *Elektra*, the conversation between the maids of the palace, can certainly be regarded as an overture. The central themes of the play are presented as if played by different instruments. Hofmannsthal's innovation is that all the themes presented briefly in the introduction are treated individually and in detail in the course of

the play. The *overture* not only gives to the audience a general idea of what to expect, but outlines the main points of the play.

The first major theme introduced in the *overture* is Elektra's deep mourning for her father: *'Ist doch ihre Stunde,/ die Stunde wo sie um den Vater heult,/ daß alle Wände schallen.'* (p.187) Elektra's grief is the most important element of the whole play. Her father's murder has influenced her life so much that her own life seems to have come to a standstill. This particular theme is treated more explicitly in her first monologue: *'Allein! Weh, ganz allein. Der Vater fort,/ hinabgeschleucht in seine kalte Klüfte./ [...] Wo bist du, Vater? hast du nicht die Kraft,/ dein Angesicht herauf zu mir zu schleppen?/ Es ist die Stunde, unsre Stunde ists!'* (p.190) Her affection for her father appears to be so strong that we become immediately aware of its anomalous nature.

Another topic presented in the introduction is Elektra's resemblance to an animal: *'[sie] springt zurück wie ein Tier.'* (p.187) All the maids but one refer to her as a wild animal, a creature without any human characteristics. That emphasizes Elektra's tragic position as she insists that all the suffering she has inflicted on herself was to prevent her from losing her identity. She has forced herself to remember so that she would not become an animal: *'Ich bin kein Vieh, ich kann nicht vergessen!'* (p.195), she screams to her sister, who urges her to forget the past and live in and for the present.

Elektra's lack of sexuality is also mentioned in the first scene of the play. She is sarcastic towards all the maids who have a normal sexual life: *'Geht ab, verkriecht euch,/ [...] Eßt Fettes und eßt Süßes/ und kriecht zu Bett mit euren Männern.'* (p.188) Nevertheless, her sarcasm and contempt is just an expression of her mourning for the sacrifice of her own sexuality. The presence of her brother, a man from the outside world brings back to her mind her suppressed sexual instincts.

Finally, it is clear in the introduction that Elektra's hatred towards her mother is as bitter and strong as her affection for her father. The maids' remark that Klytämnestra

should be keeping her daughter imprisoned, indicates that Elektra's hatred could jeopardize her mother's life: *'Wär sie mein Kind, ich hielte, ich - bei Gott - /sie unter Schloß und Riegel.'* (p.188) The intense hatred that exists between the two women is very obvious in their dialogue, which highlights reactions to visual appearances. Klytämnestra becomes furious just by looking at her daughter: *'Was willst du? Seht doch, dort! so seht doch das!/ Wie es sich aufbäumt mit geblähtem Hals/ und nach mir züngelt!/ [...] Wenn sie mich mit den Blicken töten könnte!'* (pp.198-99) Elektra's expression of her hatred is so extreme that she describes to her dumbfounded mother her own (Klytämnestra's) death in all its macabre details: *'Was bluten muß? Dein eigenes Genick, wenn dich der Jäger abgefangen hat!'* (p.209)

Apart from this musical method of accentuating the main themes of his play, Hofmannsthal also makes use of another device: the leitmotif.

Leitmotifs

The leitmotif-technique, a device whereby musical themes occur in connection with a recurrence of dramatic thought, although associated with Richard Wagner (1813-83) had been known to composers before him. For instance, it may be observed in Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and in Mendelssohn's *Elijah*. Nevertheless, although it was definitely not of his own invention, Wagner made the most of it as he was aware of its dramatic effectiveness. Nor was Hofmannsthal the first dramatist to borrow the leitmotif technique as an expressive means in a play. Liselotte Dieckmann, in her article 'The Dancing Electra' notes:

> Maeterlink in his *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam in *Axel* and Oscar Wilde in his *Salomé*, to name only a few, initiated a new dramatic

> style which was largely based on Richard Wagner's operas and theories of opera. They consciously imitated, in the medium of words, Wagner's musical structure of leitmotifs. Symbols either visually or verbally expressed assumed the role of the musical repetitions. Particularly visual effects, such as light, shadow and colors, were added to enrich the texture of the works.[55]

Following the example of the French symbolists, Hofmannsthal uses leitmotifs with a symbolic character, verbal as well as visual.

Verbal Leitmotifs

a. Blood *(Blut)*

One of the most frequent verbal leitmotifs is blood. As a symbol it has a triple meaning: first of all, it is a reminder of Agamemnon's murder, a crime which despite its having taken place in the past, still influences the lives of all the members of the family. Secondly, it is connected with the act of revenge on Klytämnestra and Ägisth, Elektra's wildest dream and her mother's most horrid nightmare. Finally, it symbolizes the strong connection between all the Atrides. They are all chained to Agamemnon through his spilt blood, his murder: Klytämnestra who committed it, Elektra who cannot forget it, Chrysothemis who wishes to forget it, Orest who has to avenge it. Although it is not certain whether Hofmannsthal was familiar with Aischylos' *Choephoroi* the similarity between the two plays at this point, even if purely coincidental, is nevertheless striking. The family's reunion in blood was a motif on which Aischylos undoubtedly concentrated his interest, as the use of so many symbolic elements conveys (for example, the tomb and

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[55] Liselotte Dieckman, 'The Dancing Electra', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 2 (1960), 3-16, (p.3).

the shroud). The fact that Hofmannsthal is stressing the same point two thousand years later, strongly suggests that the theme is interwoven in the myth and reveals itself to every playwright who treats the subject. This view can be supported by the fact that O'Neill takes great pains to highlight the meaning of the common Mannon fate and that Hauptmann links all family members together by using the axe as a symbolic object.

The word *Blut* is used for the first time by the first maid, reporting Elektra's words: *'Sie sagte: keinen Hund kann man erniedern,/ wozu man uns hat abgerichtet: daß wir/ mit Wasser und mit immer frischem Wasser/ das ewige Blut des Mordes von dem Diele/ abspülen.'* (p.189) Elektra's words indicate the haunting power Agamemnon's blood has had not only on her but on everybody in the palace. It is a first reference to the past turned into present, a motif constantly repeated: *'Nichts kann so verflucht sein, nichts,/ als Kinder, die wir hündisch auf der Treppe/ im Blute glitschend, hier in diesem Haus/ empfangen und geboren haben.'* (p.190) The image of Agamemnon's blood as a tormenting curse becomes even stronger in these lines of Elektra's repeated here by the *Aufseherin*. These two references to blood serve to prepare the audience for the scene that is to follow: Elektra's first monologue, monopolized by the word and image of blood. It is used for the first time in her monologue in a desperate attempt to communicate with her father. Her tortured mind recalls the instant that initiated her misery: the moment in which Agamemnon was violently slaughtered in his bath: *'Sie schlugen dich im Bade tot, dein Blut/ rann über deine Augen und das Bad/ dampfte von deinem Blut.'* (p.190) She is then automatically transferred from the past to the future, from Agamemnon's murder, the cause of her misfortune, to Klytämnestra's murder, her only hope for salvation. The vision of revenge is even more blood-soaked than the memory of the homicide:

Von den Sternen
stürzt alle Zeit herab, so wird das Blut

aus hundert Kehlen stürzen auf dein Grab!

[...]

darum muß ihr Blut

hinab, um dir zu Dienst zu sein, und wir,

dein Blut, dein Sohn Orest und deine Töchter,

wir drei, wenn alles dies vollbracht und Purpur-

gezelte aufgerichtet sind, vom Dunst

des Blutes, den die Sonne an sich zieht,

dann tanzen wir, dein Blut, rings um dein Grab. (p.191)

Here the symbol of blood also appears in its third meaning. It indicates the link between Agamemnon and his children. Elektra talks of it as if their father's blood were transfused in her, who is now obliged to punish those who shed it, as if defending their paternal inheritance: *'einem großen König/ wird hier ein großes Prunkfest angestellt/ von seinem Fleisch und Blut.'* (p.191) In her conversation with her sister Chrysothemis, Elektra mentions the word blood in order to demonstrate her strong feeling that what has taken place in the past is by no means over. It is as if Agamemnon were murdered over and over again: the simple sacrifice of an animal in the palace is for Elektra nothing but a symbolic repetition of Agamemnon's regicide. It is as if any kind of blood shed were Agamemnon's own blood: *'Meinst du, ich kenne den Laut nicht, wie sie Leichen/ herab die Treppe schleifen, wie sie flüstern/ und Tücher voller Blut auswinden'* (p.196) Klytämnestra's nightmares are also related to blood: *'und winselst/ nicht du ins andre Ohr, daß du Dämonen/ gesehen hast mit langen spitzen Schnäbeln,/ die mir das Blut aussaugen?'* (p.201) It is her turn to connect herself to the other members of the family through blood. It is also significant that she talks of demons sucking her blood in her nightmares while her own daughter Elektra is referred to in the play as a demon.

Klytämnestra's vivid nightmare is the reality she lives in: the demonic Elektra has set as the goal of her life to 'suck' her mother's blood. The naive Klytämnestra falls into Elektra's trap and suggests that the demon will only be satisfied when the right blood is shed, without realizing that the demon is her daughter and the right blood is her own: *'ein jeder Dämon läßt von uns, sobald/ das rechte Blut geflossen ist.'* (p.204) Her nightmares have become so tormenting that she is prepared to drown every living creature in a sea of blood in order to be released from the horrifying image of Agamemnon's blood seeking her own: *'und müßt ich jedes Tier das kriecht und fliegt,/ zur Ader lassen und im Dampf des Bluts/ aufstehen und schlafen gehen wir die Völker/ der letzten Thule in blutrotem Nebel:/ ich will nicht länger träumen.'* (p.204) Elektra pretends to be eager to help her mother to find the right victim whose sacrifice would save her mother from her evil dreams: *'wenn das rechte/ Blutopfer unterm Beile fällt, dann träumst du/ nicht länger.'* (p.204) Klytämnestra's hopes are raised as she thinks that her salvation is approaching: *'ich finde mir heraus,/ wer bluten muß, damit ich wieder schlafe.'* (p.208) But this is the chance Elektra was waiting for in order to attack:

Was bluten muß? Dein eigenes Genick,
wenn dich der Jäger abgefangen hat!
[...]
willst du nach rechts,
da steht das Bett! nach links da schäumt das Bad
wie Blut!
[...]
verendend willst du
dich auf ein Wort besinnen, irgend eines
noch von dir geben, nur ein Wort, anstatt

der blutgen Träne. (p.210)

In Elektra's second conversation with Chrysothemis, when she is trying to persuade her sister to help her to punish the murderers, the word *blood* is used as a connecting link between them. One gains the impression that Elektra is not addressing her sister, but the blood in her veins: *'ranken /will ich mich rings um dich und meine Wurzeln/ in dich versenken und mit meinem Willen/ das Blut dir impfen!/ [...] Ich spüre durch die Kühle deiner Haut/ das warme Blut hindurch.'* (p.216) She promises Chrysothemis that the latter's offering assistance will change Chrysothemis' monotonous life, it will mark the beginning of a happy future. She uses the term *blood* as the symbol for the past her sister is going to step out of if she agrees to aid her, for the misery she is going to leave behind at the dawn of her happiness in married life: *'Mädchen sträub dich nicht!/ es bleibt kein Tropfen Blut am Leibe haften:/ schnell schlüpfst du aus dem blutigen Gewand/ mit reinem Leib ins hochzeitliche Hemd.'* (p.219) Even Orest, who comes from the outside world, immediately enters the circle of the family connected by blood: *'Ich kann nichts anders als zu denken: du/ mußt ein verwandtes Blut zu denen sein,/ die starben, Agamemnon und Orest.'* (p.222) And Elektra instantly confirms her relationship to her father, characterized by blood: *'Verwandt? Ich bin dies Blut! Ich bin das hündisch/ vergoßne Blut des Königs Agamemnon!'* (p.222) However, Orest finds it hard to recognize any sign of his father's inheritance in Elektra's face, in her sanguinary look: *'Elektra/ ist groß, ihr Aug ist traurig, aber sanft,/ wo deins voll Blut und Haß.'* (p.222) With Orest's arrival the time for the revenge has come, the deed and the triumph are to follow. Nonetheless, even the feast is one of blood: A family living in blood for such a long time cannot even celebrate its victory without its macabre taste: *'überall/ in allen Höfen liegen Tote, alle,/ die leben, sind mit Blut bespritzt und haben/ selbst Wunden, und doch strahlen*

alle, alle/ umarmen sich.' (p.232) It is exactly as Elektra had pictured it. What she had not prophesized, however, was her own death.

b. Axe *(Beil)*

The second equally important leitmotif is the one of the axe (*Beil*). Its symbolic meaning is similar to the one already discussed. The axe Agamemnon was murdered with is another link between past and future and between the members of the Atrides family. As the murder weapon, it is an element of the past, but for Elektra it is her sole connection with the future as she is hoping to use it as the weapon of revenge.[56] However, until the time is ripe, the axe lies buried in the earth, just as Elektra's present is buried in the dark backyard of the palace. Like *blood* it also symbolizes the connection between the living characters and Agamemnon and consequently to one another: Klytämnestra has used the axe to kill her husband; Elektra has preserved it for the hour of revenge; Chrysothemis prefers to ignore its existence; Orest, although meant by Elektra to use it, scorns the instrument of the past and prefers to be left to his own devices.

The word *Beil* is mentioned for the first time by Elektra when Chrysothemis first appears. Here it is a symbol of Elektra's inability to forget the past and of her constant ruminating over the instant of her father's cruel assassination. Chrysothemis' raising her hands as if to defend herself from her sister's mania automatically brings to Elektra's memory Agamemnon's last gesture: his raising his hands before the axe fell. Her memory transfers her to the time of the murder, when Klytämnestra and her paramour killed Agamemnon: *'Ah, mit einem schläft sie,/ preßt ihre Brüste ihm auf beide Augen/ und winkt dem zweiten, der mit Netz und Beil/ hervorkriecht hinterm Bett.'* (p.195) Her use of the present tense in her narration indicates that she is reliving the whole scene as if it

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[56] Elizabeth Steingruber notes on the motif of the axe: ' In ihr [Elektra] kommen die beiden Taten [...] zusammen. Sie hat das Beil, mit dem der Mord an Agamemnon verübt wurde, an sich genommen und bewahrt es auf die Stunde des Gerichtes und der Sühne hin.', See Steingruber, p.83.

were happening in the present. And from this incident in the past she is automatically carried into the future: *'Ich werfe mich auf sie, ich reiß das Beil/ aus ihrer Hand und schwing es über ihr.'* (p.197) Once again the present tense is used because once again Elektra is an eye-witness of the scene she is narrating. Similarly, in the two following phrases, when the word appears, it is in relation to vengeance: *'Die Fackel schwingt er links und rechts das Beil./ [...] vor seinen Füßen drücken wir sie hin,/ da fällt das Beil.'* (pp.197-98)

In her dialogue with her mother Elektra uses the word with macabre irony, cunningly leading her mother astray: *'Wenn das rechte/ Blutopfer unterm Beile fällt, dann träumst du/ nicht länger./ [...] Nein. Diesmal/ gehst du nicht auf die Jagd mit Netz und Beil.'* (pp.204-5) It is also employed as an expression of sarcasm, when Klytämnestra talks of her inability to recollect the one important thing she has done in the past: *'Nein, die dazwischen liegt, die Arbeit,/ die tat das Beil allein.'* (p.206) Irony and sarcasm are blended together in Elektra's final explosion of her hatred: *'sausend fällt das Beil,/ und ich steh da und seh dich endlich sterben!'* (p.210) In the following conversation with her sister the role of the axe as the element that keeps Elektra imprisoned in her past is clearly indicated:

> *CHRYSOTHEMIS:*
> *Oder auch ein Beil!/*
> *ELEKTRA: Ein Beil!/*
> *Das Beil! Das Beil, womit der Vater-* (p.215)

Elektra has kept the murderous axe, has preserved it with all the tenderness she would have given to her brother, husband and child, had her father's murder not interfered so violently with the natural course of her life. She admits as much herself, as she is disinterring the axe from its grave: *'Ich grab was aus: kaum wirst du aus dem Licht sein,/*

so werd ichs haben und es herzen und/ es küssen, so wie wenns mein lieber Bruder/ und auch mein lieber Sohn in einem wäre.' (p.220) By reminding her brother of their father's brutal slaughter with the axe, she is trying to urge him to perform his duty when he shows some signs of hesitation: *'Auf das schlug sie mit hochgehobnem Beil/ von oben zu.'* (p.228)

Until now the symbol of the axe has only been used as an indicator of Elektra's living in the past, placing her only hopes in the future, and of her connection to her family. However, just before the actual deed takes place the word will be used once again, this time with a completely different symbolic meaning: Elektra forgets to give the axe to her brother, although earlier she herself had mentioned that supplying him with it would be her own important role in the act of revenge, her only way of achieving happiness and deliverance: *'und selig,/ wer ihn anrühren darf, und wer das Beil/ ihm aus der Erde gräbt,'* (p.229) However, although her mind has constantly been fixed on the axe, in the crucial moment she forgets it: *'ich habe ihm das Beil nicht geben können!/ Sie sind gegangen und ich habe ihm/ das Beil nicht geben können!'* (p.229) This dramatic exclamation reveals Elektra's complete inability not only to act herself but also to be involved in any way in anything concerning a deed. Her feebleness has its roots in Hofmannsthal's theory about pre-existence and it underlines the mere sham which language proves to be. It also prepares us for Elektra's approaching end. Elektra has been talking ceaselessly about the deed, has even envisaged it in all its ghastly details.[57] What she seems not to have contemplated correctly is her own part in it. Her forgetting to give the axe to her brother and even more his not asking for it draws our attention to the uselessness of Elektra's existence. Something that, according to her, was of major importance, proves to be of no utility whatsoever. And as Elektra has chained her existence to that axe, her life is automatically deprived of all its value. All Elektra can do

[57] However, what she has been describing was only her vision, and not a clear plan of action.

is talk. The only thing that could have marked her progress into the sphere of action, has been forgotten, dismissed as unimportant. The parallelism to Elektra's being is evident.

c. Animal *(Tier)*

Another leitmotif with a strong symbolic character is the one of animal (*Tier*). It is immediately noticeable that Elektra is often referred to as an animal. That appellation is connected with Elektra's inability to go on with her life, with her stubborn decision to stay in the past. She explains herself how her only goal has been to preserve her identity, to remain her own self. However, choosing to live in the past has apparently been the wrong way as it has deprived her of every human quality she possessed and gradually transformed her into an animal.[58] A very interesting point is also the fact that not only Elektra, but all the three female characters of the play are often likened to animals. In all three cases the symbol can be interpreted in the same way: it indicates their having lost touch with reality, their being suspended in a sphere between past and future, with no present. Klytämnestra denies her past, is afraid of her future; Chrysothemis wishes to have a future and to forget the past but also has no present, except a miserable one she detests and wishes to escape. All three of them belong neither to their time nor place. The symbolic indication of their state is the loss of their human quality.

In the introductory scene Elektra is frequently compared to an animal. The way she moves is described by Hofmannsthal as animal-like: *'Elektra springt zurück wie ein Tier in seinem Schlupfwinkel, den einen Arm vor dem Gesicht.'* (p.187) It is also significant that although all the maids see Elektra's animal quality, she not only fails to see it herself but goes so far as to address them as animals. The expressions used by the maids, *'giftig wie eine wilde Katze', 'da pflauchte sie wie eine Katze uns an', 'reckte ihre*

[58] Doswald mentions: 'By showing responses that are more animal-like than human, the image [of animal] is intended to symbolize Electra's elemental anguish and the animal state to which she has been reduced in her mother's household after Agamemnon's murder. ' See Doswald, p.204.

Finger wie Krallen gegen uns und schrie.' (p.188) are characteristic of the impression they have of Elektra. But she expresses herself in a similar way about them: *'"Fort, Fliegen!", schrie sie, "fort!"', ' Die ihren Napf von unserm Tische stieß,/ als man mit uns sie essen hieß, die ausspie/ vor uns und Hündinnen uns nannte.'* (p.189) It is clear that for Elektra, who believes she has preserved her human hypostasis by remembering the past, all other people who have gone on with their lives, have been transformed into animals. In addition, having sacrificed her sexuality and suppressed her carnal desires, she perceives a normal sexual life and the conception of children as an animal characteristic : *'Und wenn sie uns mit unsern Kindern sieht,/ so schreit sie: nichts kann so verflucht sein, nichts,/ als Kinder, die wir hündisch auf der Treppe/ im Blute glitschend, hier in diesem Haus empfangen und geboren haben.'* (p.190)

In the scene of her conversation with her sister Chrysothemis, who urges her to forget, Elektra states and explains her persistence in remembering:

> *Vergessen? Was! Bin ich ein Tier? vergessen?*
> *Das Vieh schläft ein, von halbgefreßner Beute*
> *die Lefze noch behängt,*
> *[...]*
> *das Vieh vergißt,*
> *was aus dem Leib ihm kroch, und stillt den Hunger*
> *am eignen Kind, <u>ich bin kein Vieh</u>, ich kann nicht*
> *vergessen!* (p.195) [my underlining]

These words contain the essence of Elektra's world-view: her desperate attempt to remain a human being, although surrounded by *animals*, her inability to forget. It is the point where her tragic situation is accentuated as her belief seems to be contradictory to everybody else's in the palace: Klytämnestra has forgotten, Chrysothemis is trying to

forget. And in all that manic desire to forget, Elektra's cry *'Ich kann nicht vergessen'* makes the audience wonder what is the best way for humans to preserve their humanity. It is so obvious, however, that there is nothing human about Elektra, that her exclamation, *'Ich bin kein Vieh'*, resembles the technique known in ancient Greek theatre as *tragic irony*: something tragic known to the audience, of which the hero in question is totally unaware. In Elektra's case her being an animal is evident to everybody, whereas she prides herself on having maintained her human identity. Her situation becomes even more tragic, as the next time she makes use of an animal-motif, it is to describe her own self: *'Und ich bin wie ein Hund an ihrer Ferse.'* (p.98) In her second vision of Klytämnestra's murder she uses this phrase to indicate her intention to be with her victim all the time, even at her death. Great importance is attached to two elements in that statement. Firstly, she has always been so particular about not being an animal, yet now likens herself to a dog. In her unconsciousness, her transformation is as obvious to Elektra as it is to all the other people in her environment. She has convinced herself that she has remained Elektra, but in her ecstatic vision of the act of revenge, which is exclusively the product of her unconscious world, she sees herself as an ambushing animal waiting for its victim to die. Despite being at pains to show and prove her human nature, her true nature emerges automatically, from the only moment she cannot control herself because of the wild emotional state she is in: *'Und ich bin wie ein Hund an ihrer Ferse.'* The other equally important point is that the animal chosen happens to be a dog. The word *dog* is often used in connection with sexuality. Elektra calls the palace maids who share their lives with their partners *Hündinnen* and describes as dog-like the way their children have been conceived. It is evident in these phrases that Elektra wishes to show her contempt for other people's sexual needs and behaviour. However, the sexuality she has had to sacrifice has survived in a latent form and comes to the surface in her vision. Her scorn is nothing but a strong jealousy suppressed in the name of her duty to her father's memory.

She presents herself as a woman without carnal desires whose emotions have defeated her flesh, but in her vision she sees herself as she sees all the other women around her: as a dog.

The first time she refers to her daughter, Klytämnestra speaks of her as a totally inhuman creature: *'Seht doch dort! so seht doch das!/ Wie es sich aufbäumt mit beblähtem Hals/ und nach mir züngelt!'* (p.198) From Klytämnestra's point of view it is Elektra's hatred which has metamorphosed her into an animal. There is nothing human about a daughter praying for her mother's death.[59] It is also worth mentioning that Elektra described as complete bestiality some creatures' habit of eating their own offspring when she was trying to stress her own human identity. If applied the other way round, Elektra's desire for her mother's death can certainly not be regarded as human. The connection that exists in Klytämnestra's mind between her daughter and a beast is also revealed in her superstitious belief that the sacirfice of animals possesses a delivering power. She is prepared to sacrifice every single animal, if that would save her from her tormenting nightmares. Just before this she had appealed to her daughter's power for salvation. But with the same words, without realizing it, she also refers indirectly to her own self, as Elektra cynically leads her to believe that the sacrifice of a certain animal would set her free from her fears, only to reveal later that the victim in question would be the queen herself.

The next time the word *dog* is mentioned, it is to outline Chrysothemis' reaction when she meets her mother: *'sag du deiner Schwester,/ sie soll nicht so wie ein verschreckter Hund/ vor mir ins Dunkel flüchten.'* (p.207) Even Chrysothemis is a person with a disordered identity. Yearning for woman- and motherhood she refuses to recall the events of the past to which her sister is constantly drawing her attention. Her unfulfilled

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[59] The same does not apply to Orest, as it is not his wish to kill his mother; he just executes the requested deed.

dream has deprived her of all her human qualities. She is like an animal kept against its will by its vicious master.(the one chosen -*dog*- is certainly not a coincidence; it is meant to indicate Chrysothemis' desire to exercise her sexuality).[60]

Klytämnestra's way of showing Orest's unstable state of mind is her mention of the animals he has as companions: *'Es heißt,/ er stammelt, liegt im Hofe bei den Hunden/ und weiß nicht Mensch und Tier zu unterscheiden.'* (p.207) Her words make her own and her daughters' position even more tragic, as she describes as a symptom of mental disorder the inability to distinguish between a human being and an animal. But this is exactly what she is continuously doing: talking of human beings (of her daughters in particular) as if they were animals. Her words, instead of pointing out Orest's mental instability, emphasize her own miserable state. She repeats her former statement, trying to convince Elektra that the saviour and avenger she is awaiting is nothing but a miserable, useless creature: *'Es heißt, sie gaben/ ihm eine schlechte Wohnung und die Tiere/ des Hofes zur Gesellschaft.'* (p.207) The expression *Die Tiere des Hofes* immediately draws our attention to Klytämnestra herself and her two daughters who have often been described as such.

In her second vision of the matricide, Elektra attributes animal qualities to her mother for the first time. Again, Klytämnestra's loss of human identity is stated; this time by her daughter who herself possesses very distinct animal features:

denn du,
du liegst in deinem Selbst so eingekerkert,
als wärs der glühend Bauch von einem Tier
von Erz - und so wie jetzt kannst du nicht schreien! [...]

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[60]The exercise of sexuality which was formerly treated as a symbol of normality and healthiness in the case of the maids has become such a strong obsession for Chrysothemis that it no longer has the same effect.

verendend willst du
dich auf ein Wort besinnen, irgend eines
noch von dir geben, nur ein Wort, anstatt
der blutgen Träne, die dem Tier sogar
im Sterben nicht versagt ist. (pp.209-10)

After having heard the news of Orest's supposed death, Chrysothemis, who has lost all hope of ever being released from the ordeal her life has become, resembles even more strongly an animal: *'Chrysothemis kommt, laufend zur Hoftür herein laut heulend wie ein verwundetes Tier.'* (p.211) Even one of the servants shows his scorn for the two sisters by addressing them as dogs: *'Die Hunde heulen/ beim Vollmond, und ihr heult, weil jetzt für euch/ auf immer Neumond ist. Die Hunde jagt man,/ wenn sie die Hausruh stören. Gebt ihr acht,/ sonst gehts euch ebenso.'* (p.213) Once again the characters' similarity to an animal grows stronger as their hopes of realizing their plans become weaker. Chrysothemis has reacted like a wounded animal to the information of Orest's death; Elektra behaves like one on realizing her sister's unwillingness to aid her: *'Sie fängt an der Wand des Hauses, seitwärts der Türschwelle, eifrig zu graben an, lautlos, wie ein Tier.'* (p.219) Herman Doswald notes on this point:

> The animal image used so often to describe Electra is referred to Chrysothemis, but how different is the effect of the wounded animal which is to be conveyed here, the animal lamenting its fate rather than crying out against it as Electra does.[61]

This particular picture of Elektra is intensified by Orest's arrival immediately afterwards: a human being coming from the light outside world in antithesis to the

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[61] Doswald, p.207.

animal-like creature haunting the dark, shadowy back-yard. While revealing her identity to the stranger her brother is pretending to be, Elektra employs an animal image to depict her utter loneliness: *'und ich hier droben/ allein! Wie nicht das Tier des Waldes einsam/ und gräßlich lebt.'* (p.222) Her despair has driven her to such an extremity that she seems to have completely forgotten her heroic exclamation at the beginning at the play *'Ich bin kein Vieh, ich kann nicht vergessen!'* It is another instance of tragic irony that Elektra senses so strongly her solitude which is worse than a wild animal's, at the very moment that her brother has returned and the deed she has been praying for is approaching its realization.

When Orest describes his sister's life as he remembers it, her being surrounded by animals serves as a proof of her nobleness: *'Zwei, drei Frauen/ hat sie um sich, die lautlos dienen, Tiere/ umschleichen ihre Wohnung scheu und schmiegen/ sich, wenn sie geht, an ihr Gewand.'* (p.223) Two things are made clear by his utterance: firstly the fact that he is an absolute outsider. Coming from a completely different world, he uses the word *animal* without knowing the hideous meaning attached to it inside the palace. It is also characteristic that Klytämnestra, an inhabitant of the *inside* world, describes as a curse Orest's hypothetical living with animals, whereas Orest regards it as a sign of his sister's bliss and superiority. It also serves as yet another intensification of Elektra's, Klytämnestra's and Chrysothemis' situation, as Elektra is still surrounded by *animals*, precisely as Orest recalls, but not ones that love her or recognize her superiority. The difference is that now her mother, sister and she herself belong in the category of animals. A repetition of the same motif is Orest's remark: *'Die Hunde auf dem Hof erkennen mich,/ und meine Schwester nicht?'* (p.224), when he decides to reveal his true identity to his sister. Despite seeing the miserable creature who claims to be his sister in front of his eyes, he still cannot accept her total metamorphosis. Having spent his entire life far from the palace, he cannot conceive the transformation his sister has gone through, even when

Elektra repeatedly describes her condition: *'und hab geschrieen/ im Hofe und gewinselt mit den Hunden.'* (p.227)

The last instance of a parallel between Elektra and an animal occurs during the matricide. Orest has entered the palace to accomplish his task and Elektra waits outside in a state of wild excitement: *'sie läuft auf einem Strich vor der Tür hin und her, mit gesenktem Kopf, wie das gefangene Tier im Käfig.'* (p.229) It is significant that she is not characterized only as an animal, but as an animal caught in a cage. Her total inability to act is suggested more directly than ever. The verbal expression of her impotence *(Ich habe ihm das Beil nicht geben können)* is accompanied by the picture of being like an encaged, powerless animal; the verbal and visual motifs emphasize each other and the effect created is the most tragic of the whole play.

d. Bed *(Bett)*

The last verbal leitmotif is the one of the *bed.* This element, like the other ones, is used in connection with the past and the future of the characters involved. For Klytämnestra it functions as a constant reminder of her adultery and crime, of her past she strongly wishes to forget. In Chrysothemis' case, with the meaning of a wedding-bed it points to her desire to leave behind her lonely maidenhood and enter the happiness of married life, a dream that may never come true. For Elektra it is the proof of her sacrifice, and of her loyalty to her father's memory. She has offered him her beauty and youth, replaced her fragile femininity with a poisonous hatred, lost her human identity. The sleepless nights she has spent on her lonely bed have transformed her into a demon.

However, the strongest symbolic function of the *bed*-motif is its relation to sexuality, once again in reference to the three main female characters. Klytämnestra's

adultery is the origin of the misfortune that has struck the palace. It has caused Agamenon's death, Chrysothemis' enslavement, Elektra's metamorphosis.

Elektra is the first to mention the word *bed* when she addresses the maids of the palace: *'Eßt Fettes und eßt Süßes/ und kriecht zu Bett mit euren Männern.'* (p.188) We become aware of two important points in her words: the direct reference to sexuality and Elektra's scorn and disgust. From her words it is evident that everything related to sexuality is for Elektra repugnant. The ferocity of her expression also indicates that she is almost certainly not a puritanistic person by nature, but rather a woman who has adopted this attitude because of a trauma of a sexual nature in the past. Her next words clarify this point: *'Die Stunde, wo sie dich geschlachtet haben,/ dein Weib und der mit ihr in einem Bette,/ in deinem königlichen Bette schläft.'* (p.190) In her dialogue with her father the cause of her contempt is stated: it has arisen from her mother's affair which has led to her father's death. Struggling to be different from her mother Elektra reaches the extremity of denying her sexual instinct. Her mother's weakness has been destructive; Elektra's wish is to be strong. Her view of sexuality as a form of weakness becomes even clearer in her characterization of Ägisth: *'Nun, meine Mutter/ und jenes andre Weib, die Memme, ei/ Ägisth, der tapfre Meuchelmörder, er,/ der Heldentaten nur im Bett vollführt.'* (p.192) By referring to Ägisth as a woman, she denies her own female nature. She talks with scorn, as if she did not belong to the same category, as if she were a sexless creature: for her, being a woman is not only being weak, but also vile and criminal: *'Ah, mit einem schläft sie,/ preßt ihre Brüste ihm auf beide Augen/ und winkt dem zweiten, der mit Netz und Beil/ hervorkriecht hinterm Bett.'* (p.195) The *bed* has proved to be Klytämnestra's cunning device, the indirect weapon of the murder, her power, despite Elektra's constant talking of weakness. Elektra perceives herself as strong because she is not subdued to carnal desires. The irony is, however, that this is the major element that has caused her

weakness: she has mutilated her nature through contempt for it, whereas Klytämnestra has certainly not weakened herself through her deed, but by refusing to remember it.

The first time the word *bed* is used in relation to the future, it is in Elektra's vision of the act of revenge: *'Ich hör ihn durch die Zimmer gehn,/ und ich hör ihn/ den Vorhang vor dem Bette hängen.'* (p.197) She pictures her brother commiting the matricide. Her picture of the murder taking place in the bed suggests that her recollection of the past is emerging into the future. Klytämnestra has used her bed as a trap: therefore she has to be punished on it. In this particular instance the leitmotif of the bed is analogous to that of the axe. There will only be justice if it is an accurate reproduction of the original crime.

In her dialogue with her daughter, Klytämnestra uses the motif of the *bed* as a way of approaching her: *'kein strenges Wort/ ist ganz unwiderruflich, und die Mutter,/ wenn sie schlecht schläft, denkt lieber sich an das Kind/ im Ehebett als an der Kette liegen.'* (p.206) Trying to placate Elektra, she makes the grave mistake of mentioning the only word that could make Elektra's hatred rise: wedding-bed. Having forgotten herself its destructive connotation, as she has tried to erase all events of the past from her memory, she hopes to gain her daughter's confidence by referring to a matter she thinks of as dear to any woman, a common link. Nevertheless, for Elektra a wedding bed does not imply a happy, married life. It reminds her of her mother's crime, of her oath to avenge her father's murder. It is not surprising that the answer is not in the least what Klytämnestra might have expected: *'Da gehts dem Kinde umgekehrt: das dächte/ die Mutter lieber tot als in dem Bette.'* (p.206)

The motif of the *bed* appears once again in Elektra's vision of the hour of revenge : *'Er jagt dich auf,/ er treibt dich durch das Haus! willst du nach rechts,/ da steht das Bett!'* (p.209) Again we have the same predominant idea of the bed to act as a link between the past and future crime, of the revenge as the exact repetition of the murder.

The first time the word appears with a positive meaning is in Elektra's attempt to persuade Chrysothemis to become her accomplice. This is also the first time *bed* appears in connection with Chrysothemis: *'bevor er dich, die durch die Schleier glüht/ wie eine Fackel, in das Hochzeitsbett/ mit starken Armen zieht.'* (p.217) For Klytämnestra *bed* has been her power, for Elektra the altar of her self-sacrifice, for Chrysothemis it is the sign of her vulnerability. Having focused all her dreams on woman-and motherhood, her wedding-bed is for Chrysothemis the emblem of her bliss. Elektra is doing exactly what her mother did with Agamemnon: she is using the wedding-bed as her instrument of deception. Elektra's seeming indifference towards married life gives her the strength to manipulate Chrysothemis much as Klytämnestra used her own power to deceive Agamemnon. When the bed as the symbol of married life proves to be insufficient to convince Chrysothemis, Elektra goes a step further and uses it in connection with motherhood: *'Wenn du liegst in Wehn,/ steh ich an deinem Bette Tag und Nacht.'* (pp.217-18) She offers her sister everything she has ever dreamt of, with her assistance as recompense. Chrysothemis' refusal intensifies Elektra's belief that being a woman means being weak. Chrysothemis does not follow the example of her mother who used her *bed* as a method of becoming strong.

Having exploited her mother's and sister's relation to the motif of *bed*, Elektra finds herself explaining to her brother its meaning in her own life. Her father's death-cry has been so loud and penetrating that it has attacked the privacy of her bed. She reveals the tragic truth about her transformation into the sexless person she has become. Originally proud of her feminine beauty and eager to make her bed the focus-point of her happiness, she has had to share it not with a loving husband but with the personification of hatred sent to her by her father. This is the only time she has allowed herself to be weak: however, the encounter with what she describes as a beast has filled her with

strength; her union with him has deprived her of her femininity, which only comes back as a vague picture of an old memory.

Despite her contempt for all the things *bed* stands for, towards the end of the play, while referring to the meaning of action, Elektra introduces a completely new aspect of the motif. She talks of *bed* as if it were the ultimate way of purification, the only means of achieving real and eternal peace: *'Der ist selig,/ der tuen darf! Die Tat ist wie ein Bette,/ auf dem die Seele ausruht, wie ein Bett/ von Balsam, darauf die Seele ruhen kann.'* (p.228) For the first time she realizes the connection between deed and bed and their delivering power. She is unable to act, has despised her femininity, has sacrificed her sexuality in the name of her hatred; her soul will never find its *bed of balsam*, it will never have a chance of gaining peace.

Visual leitmotifs

In addition to the verbal leitmotifs already discussed, Hofmannsthal also employs visual motifs. Being a theatrical play, *Elektra* is intended for an audience. Hofmannsthal seems to be following in particular the tradition of the ancient Greek dramatists who were aware of the importance of communicating ideas to their audience non-verbally. However, the two main visual leitmotifs in *Elektra*, the lighting and colours, point to the French Symbolistic School and to Oscar Wilde.[62] *Salomé* was written in French in 1891 and translated into English by Lord Alfred Douglas in 1894. When Wilde first tried to stage this exotic and controversial play in London it was banned by the Lord Chamberlain for transgressing a centuries-old law forbidding the portrayal of Biblical characters on stage. It was, therefore, first performed in Paris in 1896 with the actress Sarah Bernhardt in the title role. This atmospheric drama clearly owes much to the influence of Symbolism, a late nineteenth-century movement in French poetry and painting characterized by the use of words and pictures not with concrete but with symbolic meanings. The superficial similarity between *Salomé* and *Elektra* has often been a subject of discussion, despite Hofmannsthal's unwillingness to admit it:

> Nun muß ich schon sagen, daß ich, wie die Dinge mir nun zu liegen scheinen, allerdings sehr froh wäre, wenn Sie es möglich fänden zunächst an der *Elektra* festzuhalten, deren 'Ähnlichkeiten' mit dem Salome-Stoff mir bei näherer Überlegung doch auf ein Nichts zusammenzuschrumpfen scheinen. (Es sind zwei Einakter, jeder hat einen Frauennamen, beide spielen im Altertum und beide wurden in Berlin von der Eysoldt kreiert:

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[62] In addition, there was a strong tradition in Austrian theatre - especially in Grillparzer - of visual drama. Furthermore, the rise of the producer in the theatre around 1900 (for example Max Reinhardt) led to the increasing exploitation of scenic effects.

> ich glaube darauf läuft die ganze Ähnlichkeit hinaus). Denn die Farbenmischung scheint mir in beiden Stoffen eine so wesentlich verschiedene zu sein: bei der *Salome* so viel purpur und violet gleichsam, in einer schwülen Luft, bei der *Elektra* dagegen ein Gemenge aus Nacht und Licht, schwarz und hell.[63]

The above statement is a reply to Richard Strauss's letter expressing his doubts about producing an operatic version of *Elektra* immediately after having finished work on Wilde's *Salomé*, a play which seemed to the composer to bear striking similarities to Hofmannsthal's one-act tragedy. But while trying to outline his play's dissimilarity to Oscar Wilde's, Hofmannsthal suggests a resemblance between the two plays as far as the visual motifs are concerned. *Elektra* and *Salomé* may have different colours and lighting; but these two elements, used symbolically, are equally essential for both plays. The first visual leitmotif in *Elektra* is the element of darkness in antithesis to light.

a. Darkness

Like the verbal leitmotifs, darkness also has a symbolic character. It points to an important element of the play already indicated by the motifs of axe and blood: that of time standing still in the back-yard of the palace, and the curse not allowing the members of the Atrides family to go on with their lives. It is characteristic that the three female characters are either accompanied by darkness or artificial light, whereas Orest, who comes from the outside world and does not suffer from the family curse, appears in light.[64]

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[63] Richard Strauss - Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Briefwechsel* (Zürich: Atlantis, 1964), p.19.

[64] Doswald notes: 'The function [of the stage illumination] throughout the tragedy is to create an alternating atmosphere of dark and light which serves to contrast the gloom and darkness prevailing in the household of Agamemnon with the light of the outside world and to symbolize the themes and mood of the play and the conflict of characters with each other and within themselves.' See Doswald, p.201.

Elektra is the first main character to emerge from a dark background: *'Elektra kommt aus der schon dunkelnden Hausflur gelaufen.'* (p.187) She comes running, as if trying to escape from the darkness, from the curse. Yet the following comment of the maids shows that darkness is her natural environment: *'Immer wenn die Sonne tief steht,/ liegt sie und stöhnt.'* (p.187) Darkness is here used in connection with Elektra's mourning, her link to the past. The fact that she chooses sunset for her lamentation, for her return to the past, suggests that darkness can be regarded as the symbolic depiction of the immobility of time for her. This motif is further expanded by the playwright in his 'Szenische Vorschriften zu *Elektra*': 'Diese Beleuchtung ist am stärksten während des Monologs der Elektra.'[65] The haunting quality of darkness is obvious in the words of the only maid who favours Elektra, when she is cursing the other maids to die in darkness because of their inhumane behaviour towards Elektra: *'O/ könnt ich euch alle, euch, erhängt am Halse,/ in einer Scheuer Dunkel hängen sehen/ um dessen willen, was ihr an Elektra/ getan habt!'* (p.189)

Even Chrysothemis considers darkness as the ultimate and most horrid punishment when she warns Elektra not to show her hostility towards her mother and Ägisth so intensely, as they intend to imprison her in a gloomy tower to silence her: *'Sie werfen dich/ in einen Turm, wo du von Sonn und Mond/ das Licht nicht sehen wirst.'* (p.192) The threatened punishment seems ludicrous to Elektra, whose everyday life is much darker than any prison could ever be.

Darkness is also used to indicate the difference between the two sisters, who both spend their lives in the same gloomy environment. The difference is that Elektra has adjusted herself so perfectly to the situation, that darkness has become her nature, something which will never be the case for her younger sister. For Chrysothemis feels the

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[65] Hugo von Hofmannsthal, 'Szenische Vorschriften zu *Elektra*' in *Gesammelte Werke*, Dramen II (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1979), p.261.

ordeal of living in utter darkness, being continuously reminded of the past. She clearly manifests her abhorrence for it: *'Ich kann nicht sitzen und ins Dunkel starren/ wie du.'* (p.193) She desires to be liberated, to have a chance to live in the outside world, where the sun rises and sets in antithesis to the interior of the palace, where the sun appears to be constantly in total eclipse: *'und draußen geht die Sonne auf und ab.'* (p.194)

Although aware of her own dark existence, Elektra repeats in her vision of her mother's death Chrysothemis' view of darkness as the worst punishment: *'Es ist viel finsterer als Nacht,/ viel stiller und finstrer als im Grab, sie keucht und taumelt/ im Dunkel hin, doch ist er hinterdrein.'* (p.197) To her mother's threats of incarceration in a tower Elektra replies by describing her vision of her mother's death taking place in a horrifying darkness:

> *Will sie in eine Höhle, spring ich sie*
> *von seitwärts an, so treiben wir sie fort,*
> *bis eine Mauer alle sperrt, und dort*
> *im tiefsten Dunkel, doch ich seh ihn wohl,*
> *ein Schatten, und doch Glieder und das Weiße*
> *von einem Auge doch, da sitzt der Vater.* (p.197)

Her words make clear that for her living in the darkness has not been voluntary, but more a matter of not having another choice. The only way for Elektra to drag her mother into the darkness would be by inflicting the same punishment on her own self first.

Klytämnestra's first appearance, accompanied by dazzling light, comes as a shock immediately after her daughter, in prophesizing her death, has enchained her with darkness: *'Fackeln und Gestalten erfüllen den Gang links von der Tür. [...] An dem grell erleuchteten Fenstern klirrt und schlürft ein hastiger Zug vorüber.'* (p.198) But it is significant that the light Klytämnestra brings with her is artificial. It is her way of fighting

against darkness, she is trying to defeat it by illuminating her entrance with lanterns. Horrified by her past destroying her future, by her life becoming darker and darker, she has become so superstitious that she believes that even artificial light possesses a protective power. Tragically, she manages only to illuminate her fear: *'Ihr fahles, gedunsenes Gesicht erscheint noch bleicher über dem scharlachroten Gewand.'* (p.198) Horrified by her daughter, she uses the motif of light to stress her superiority, her power over her: *'Es könnte/ der letzte Tag sein, daß du dieses Licht/ da siehst.'* (p.200) It is also once again suggested that not seeing the light is regarded as the most severe punishment. However, Elektra's sarcastic reply makes obvious the feebleness of Klytämnestra's threat: *'Ich weiß auf der Welt/ nichts, was mir schaudern macht, als wie zu denken,/ daß dieser Leib das dunkle Tor, aus welchem/ ich an das Licht der Welt gekrochen bin.'* (p.200) Klytämnestra, despite having taken great pains to present herself as a luminous character, is likened to a black door. Elektra has been brought to the light of the world by her mother, the same person who forced her to return to darkness. Elektra's life was illuminated by the happiness of having a father, a brother and a sister, an existence, but all of a sudden the light was extinguished and she had no other choice but to return to complete darkness through the same black door: her mother's body. Both characters' attachment to dimness and to each other is emphasized by the fact that the artificial light of the lanterns disappears just before the beginning of their conversation, which consequently takes place in the natural dusk of the back-yard: *'Auch die Fackeln verschwinden, und nur aus dem Innern des Hauses fällt ein schwacher Schein durch den Flur auf den Hof und streift hie und da die Gestalten der beiden Frauen.'* (p.202) It is evident that Klytämnestra is afraid of her daughter: *'Warum stehst du so im Dunkel?'* (p.202) Elektra's standing in the darkness not only makes her unapproachable to her mother but also dangerous. The fact that even when she wakes up from her nightmares she is still surrounded by darkness gives her the impression that her evil dreams do not

cease to exist in her waking-state but follow her constantly through the darkness: *'und was unterm Vorhang/ hereingrinst, ist noch nicht der fahle Morgen,/ nein, immer noch die Fackel vor der Tür.'* (p.203) Her desperate need for any kind of light is indicated by the fact that all she wishes to see as reassurance is not a dazzling light but only a pale ray.

Until now the lack of light has been used as a symbolic depiction of Elektra's and Klytämnestra's tragic situation. Chrysothemis has openly declared her inability to spend her life in darkness. And yet, in Klytämnestra's following remark, even she is presented tied to darkness: *'Sag du deine Schwester,/ sie soll nicht so wie ein verschreckter Hund/ vor mir ins Dunkel flüchten.'* (p.207) Chrysothemis is trying to run away from her mother's dark presence. As darkness has come to mean for her everything she detests, she does not have the strength to face the gloominess her mother brings with her. The tragic nature of her attempt is accentuated by the fact that she escapes into darkness. She is like a caged animal sensing the necessity of coming out of its cage but continuously bumping against the bars. Chrysothemis realizes the urgency of fleeing but darkness obstructs her way.

The danger Klytämnestra feels in the darkness is mentioned once again as her daughter jumps out of it and describes to her mother her vision of her death:

das Dunkel und die Fackeln werfen
schwarzrote Todesnetze über dich -
[...]
diese Zeit -
sie dehnt sich vor dir wie ein finstrer Schlund
von Jahren - diese Zeit ist dir gegeben,
zu ahnen, wie es Scheiternden zumut ist,

wenn ihr vergebliches Geschrei die Schwärze
der Wolken und des Tods zerfrißt. (p.209)

The same effect is created when immediately after Elektra's second dark vision of her mother's death, the back-yard is suddenly lit up: *'In diesem Augenblick erhellt sich der Hausflur und die Vertraute kommt herausgelaufen.'* (p.210) However, it is an exact repetition of the motif used after Elektra's first vision: the light is artificial and again it proves to be throwing light on a lie: Orest's death. Wild with happiness on hearing the news about the death of her most dangerous enemy, her son, Klytämnestra commands her maids to light up the back-yard:

Sie winkt: Lichter! Es treten Dienerinnen mit Fackeln heraus, stellen sich hinter Klytämnestra. Sie winkt: Mehr Lichter! Es kommen mehr heraus, stellen sich hinter sie, so daß der Hof voll von Licht wird und rot-gelber Schein an den Mauern flutet. (p.210)

She thinks that she has finally defeated her fate, brought to an end her scaring nightmares, and she celebrates her victory with lights. Her threat to her daughter that she might never see the light of the day again turns on her, as these lanterns are the last light she is going to see: even the last light of her life has to be artificial, fake. The difference from the real light is immediately noticeable on Orest's appearance. Orest, the free man who comes from the outside world, directing his life with his own deeds, is the first and only character accompanied by light. In his case light symbolizes his clear but also healthy memory of the past, his determination and eagerness to take his present into his own hands, his certainty of a future in contrast to the eternal sinking into immobility and timelessness of the female members of his family. However, his appearance as a dark shadow emerging out of the light, indicates his having been affected by the oppressive

atmosphere of the place he is about to enter. This first entrance of Orest is the only reference in the play to the natural light of day. After that, even he becomes swallowed up into the darkness. Elektra's first words to her brother can be seen as yet another tragic irony: *'Was treibst du dich/ zur dunklen Stunde hier herum?'* (p.219) Elektra's grief has reached its peak: she is now mourning for her murdered father, her dead brother, her sister's unwillingness to help her, her own destiny. Her pain has blinded her in such a way that she describes as dark the only bright moment of her life: her brother's return.

Before stating his identity, Orest describes to his sister her brother's supposed death. Orest, he says dies because he boasted too much about the brightness of his life; this caused the gods anger and they decided to punish him by a death in darkness:

> *Er freute sich zu sehr*
> *an seinem Leben, und die Götter droben*
> *vertragen nicht den allzu hellen Laut*
> *der Lust, ein allzu starkes Flügelschlagen*
> *vor Abend widert sie, sie greifen schnell*
> *nach einem Pfeil und nageln das Geschöpf*
> *an seines dunklen Schicksals finstern Baum,*
> *der ihn im stillen irgendwo schon längst*
> *gewachsen war.* (pp.221-22)

Once again darkness is presented as a kind of punishment. What is new, though, is the character of light. It is almost described as a sin. Orest had to die because he was enjoying light too much. But in reality we find exactly the opposite happening: Orest will go on living because of the bright light surrounding him; Klytämnestra and Elektra will die because their existence has sunk in deep darkness.

Also characteristic of the atmosphere in the palace is the appearance of the sullen servant, the first character to recognize Orest as his master. It can be a symbolization of darkness's inferiority to light, of action's readiness to take the place of immobility. It also shows how absolutely everybody in the palace is a gloomy figure: *'Der alte finstre Diener stürzt aus dem Hof lautlos herein.'* (p.224)

The entirely different lives Elektra and Orest have led until the moment they meet is emphasized in Elektra's description of her life-style: *'und Tag/ ist Nacht, und Nacht ist wieder Tag geworden,/ und an der Sonne nicht und an den Sternen/ hab ich mich nicht gefreut.'* (p.227) Orest has already described how he has almost sinfully enjoyed light in his life. In just one sentence Elektra's misery is concentrated: she has not been able to enjoy the principal joy in life: the natural life of the sun and stars. This antithesis, as we are progressing towards the end, accentuates the power Orest has acquired from his way of living and the feebleness Elektra suffers as a result of her having spent a lifetime in darkness. The contrast between them, as far as the deed is concerned, is made even clearer just before Orest enters the palace to perform the matricide. He is escorted by lights, whereas Elektra once again remains in the darkness: *'Die Tür des Hauses erhellt sich und es erscheint eine Dienerin mit einer Fackel, hinter ihr die Vertraute. Elektra ist zurückgesprungen, steht im Dunkel.'* (p.229)

The only other male character of the play, apart from Orest and the phantom of the dead king, appears towards the end, just before his execution: Ägisth. Klytämnestra's paramour and partner in crime appears as scared at the prospect of the avenger of Agamemnon's death coming back as the queen has been previously. It is also significant that they both use exactly the same means of showing that they have done away with the ghosts of the past, although they are both scared. They both command the servants to light up the palace: *'Ist niemand da zu leuchten?'* (p.231) He senses danger in darkness and wishes to see the reassuring brightness of even an artificial light. He is unpleasantly

surprised when he sees an unknown, atrocious creature approaching him holding a lantern, whose face he later recognizes as Elektra's. In Elektra's hands light has the same function as the axe has had previously. It could have been her way of performing a deed, had she escorted the victim to the avenger and helped him to kill him. But again her jurisdiction is limited: she is only allowed to accompany Ägisth as far as the doorstep:

ELEKTRA:

Erlaubst du, daß ich voran dir leuchte?

ÄGISTH:

Bis zur Tür. (p.231)

She has to stay outside once again, excluded from the place where Ägisth is about to enter and face his death: *'Warum ist hier kein Licht?'* But she also remains excluded from the grandeur of the celebration following the murder of the usurper; a feast with light as its main characteristic: *'tausend Fackeln sind angezündet.'* (p.233) All alone as in the very beginning of the play, she takes a few steps as if following the ritual of an unknown dance and collapses in darkness.

b. Colours

A second visual leitmotif related to that of light and dark is also used as a method of accentuating the symbolic function and character of the verbal motifs. The only two colours occurring as leitmotifs are red (in a variety of shades) and black. Red is associated with blood and all it stands for in the play; black, associated with darkness, also indicates the immobility of time inside the palace. Herman Doswald suggests: ' As the play begins, the stage is bathed in red and black light cast through the branches of the fig tree, and the themes of blood, sensuality, murder and death are immediately suggested.' (p.201)

Elektra appears for the first time against a background of a red light clearly and directly likened to stains of blood: *'Sie ist allein mit den Flecken roten Lichtes, die [...] schräg über den Boden auf die Mauern fallen wie Blutflecke.'* (p.190) Her first monologue, her conversation with her dead father, dominated by the symbol of blood, is about to commence. The red light behind her stresses the importance of the verbal motif and makes it more evident to the audience, for they are made to feel as surrounded by blood as Elektra seems to be.[66]

The second character who also makes her appearance against a red background is Klytämnestra. Red in Klytämnestra's case can be interpreted as a symbol of the danger constantly threatening her and of her fear of death. The dark-red dress she is wearing intensifies the paleness of her face and makes her resemble a ghost rising from blood. Once again the audience is warned what to expect: a woman in a unhinged state of mind: *'Ihr fahles, gedunsenes Gesicht, in dem grellen Licht der Fackeln, erscheint noch bleicher*

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66 'This illumination is strongest during the monologue of Electra who appears on the stage alone amidst the blood-like patches of red light. The color red predominates throughout her monologue as she talks of the blood revenge she must have, and it is used as a symbol for the theme of blood which becomes associated with Electra and runs through the play like a leitmotif', (Doswald, p.201.)

über dem scharlachroten Gewand. Sie stürzt sich auf eine Vertraute die dunkelviolett gekleidet ist.' (p.198)

In Elektra's following exclamation the two chromatic motifs appear combined in one: *'das Dunkel und die Fackeln werfen schwarzrote Todesnetze über dich.'* (p.209) It is the most intense symbolic depiction of Elektra's vision: blood enchained with darkness can only symbolize one thing: a cruel death. Yet, even when darkness disappears under the light of the lanterns the red background still remains. The light falling on it simply manages to change its shade: *'Es kommen mehr heraus, stellen sich hinter sie, so daß der Hof voll vom Licht wird und rotgelber Schein an den Mauern flutet.'* (p.210) The red shadow resembling an old blood-stain is impossible to remove.

In the dialogue in which Elektra describes to her brother her former bliss of a serene life, there occur for the first and last time two colours completely foreign to the chromatic identity of the palace: *'Auch die Scham, die süßer/ als alles ist, die wie der Silberdunst,/ der milchige, beim Mond um jedes Weib/ herum ist und das Gräßliche von ihr/ und ihrer Seele weghält.'* (pp.226-27) A pale shade of silver and white depicting Elektra's purity, innocence and bliss in the years before her father's death had its traumatizing effect upon her, emphasizing, with the powerful antithesis it creates, her present state: an infernal creature, saturated in red shades of blood. The ethereal princess has become a bloodthirsty demon; the heavenly, delicate colours have been replaced by others of a provoking strength. Elektra recognizes in her brother's face all she has had to sacrifice and becomes aware of the tragic fact that she has lost her tranquility, her delicacy for ever. Even if her enemies are killed and she goes on living the scars of blood will always be noticeable on her.

Gestures - Facial Expressions

Although of major importance, the elements borrowed from the field of music are not the only means of expression in Hofmannsthal's play. Gestures, another method frequently employed, may not have the ritualistic character they possessed in ancient Greeek theatre but their use is based on the same concept. Deriving directly from religious rites, Greek drama had a highly distinct ceremonial identity, where certain gestures of the characters were to be interpreted by the audience in only one specific way: for instance, touching someone's knee would automatically imply an act of supplication. Of course this could not be the case in Hofmannsthal's play as his audience, not being Athenians of the fifth century B.C., would not be in the position to understand the meaning of ritualistic gestures as their ancient counterparts would have done. The main idea, however, is identical in both cases: Hofmannsthal's purpose, as well as the ancient dramatists' was to communicate certain ideas and feelings to his audience non-verbally and thus intensify the action taking place on stage.

With their faces hidden behind masks, the ancient actors could not use facial expressions to indicate their change of mood. However, their masks were designed according to each character's personality and general mood. In modern theatre the abolition of masks offers to the dramatist yet another expressive possibility: the joy, sadness, triumph, pain, grief on the faces of the actors accompanying their words shows their emotions directly and helps the audience to identify with the characters. Nevertheless, some modern playwrights followed the tradition of using masks, as for instance Eugene O'Neill, in whose plays masks usually have the function of a symbolic element.

The first character to appear is Elektra: She *'springt zurück wie ein Tier in seinem Schlupfwinkel, den einen Arm vor dem Gesicht.'* (p.187) Her gesture is the first sign of her

strange behaviour. She appears as if she were a scared animal, hiding herself from the people around her. Her gesture is the non-verbal equivalent of the maids' description of her: *'da sprang sie auf uns und schoß/ gräßliche Blicke, reckte ihre Finger/ wie Krallen gegen uns und schrie.'* (p.188) During her first monologue Elektra has completely lost touch with reality. The expression on her face on hearing her sister whispering her name is the accurate depiction of her disordered state[67]: *'Elektra fährt zusammen wie der Nachtwandler, der seinen Namen rufen hört. Sie taumelt. Ihre Augen sehen um sich, als fänden sie sich nicht gleich zurecht. Ihr Gesicht verzerrt sich, wie sie die ängstliche Miene der Schwester ansieht.'* (p.192) The relationship between the two sisters is also indicated by the way they look at each other when they first meet. Chrysothemis seems to be afraid of her elder sister's wildness; Elektra looks irritated to have her vision disturbed by the presence of Chrysothemis, whose fear of Elektra is made clear by her gesture: *'Chrysothemis hebt wie abwehrend die Hände.'* (p.192) She is also trying to protect herself, not from the cruelty of the maids as her sister has done previously but from Elektra's insane viciousness.

Klytämnestra's inner state is depicted on her face at her first appearance. Her pale, swollen face points to a kind of illness, more explicitly stated in the following description: *'die Lider ihrer Augen scheinen übermäßig groß, und es scheint ihr eine furchtbare Anstrengung zu kosten, sie offen zu halten.'* (p.198) Before she starts talking about the cause of her condition we can already deduce its nature. Klytämnestra is having sleepless nights, almost certainly tormented by horrid nightmares, as clearly indicated by her heavy eye-lids. Her feelings towards her daughter Elektra are also noticeable on her face: *'Klytämnestra öffnet jäh die Augen, zitternd vor Zorn tritt sie ans Fenster und zeigt*

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[67] Doswald notes on this point: 'The second image used to describe Electra's emotional state is that of the emotionally disturbed woman whose actions, ranging from fixed and silent staring to frenzied raging, betray her psychological disorientation. When Electra's introductory monologue is interrupted by her sister [...] the stage directions compare her to a somnambulant.' See Doswald, p.204.

mit dem Stock auf Elektra.' (p.198) We can read the hatred and anger on the queen's face as she first sets her eyes on her daughter, in connection with her weary look this may point to the fact that she regards Elektra as responsible for her state: it is also evident by the way she moves the stick she is holding that she wishes to warn, if not to threaten her daughter about something. Elektra's feelings are obviously analogous as her mother's following exclamation implies: *'Wenn sie mich mit den Blicken töten könnte!'* (p.199) The poisonous look in Elektra's eyes and not her words outlines her hatred: *'Elektra mit einem Sprung aus dem Dunkel auf sie zu, immer näher an ihr, immer furchtbarer wachsend.'* (p.209) The two women can do nothing to conceal their emotions, betrayed by the expressions of their faces and their overall posture: *'Sie stehen einander, Elektra in wildester Trunkenheit, Klytämnestra gräßlich atmend vor Angst, Aug in Aug.'* (p.210)

All of a sudden, we notice a peculiar change in Klytämnestra's features. Her anger and panic are replaced by an expression of wild triumph, as if she had heard the news of the greatest victory of her life, a victory which gives her the power even to threaten Elektra at whose sight she appeared totally horror-stricken an instant ago. She has just heard the news of Orest's supposed death. This now fills her with a feeling of security and superiority over her daughter, whose threats of the avenger being on his way to punish his mother now resemble a childish joke. The same false information seems to have unified Elektra and Chrysothemis, who are now in exactly the same tragic position, mourning for the loss of all their hopes: *'Der Koch gegen Elektra und Chrysothemis hin, die aneinandergedrückt daliegen wie ein Leib, den das Schluchzen der Chrysothemis schüttelt und über den sich das totenbleiche schweigende Gesicht der Elektra hebt.'* (p.213) Nothing could have been a more accurate description of the two sisters' pain, nothing could have created a more powerful impact than their presentation as one body struck by the same misfortune.

The most astonishing instance of non-verbal expression in the play accompanies the dialogue when Elektra is trying to persuade her sister to assist her to punish the murderers. The whole dialogue and its outcome is clearly outlined by the gestures and facial expressions of the two women:

> *ELEKTRA: Dicht an ihr.*
>
> *CHRYSOTHEMIS: Flüchtet ein paar Schritte.*
>
> *ELEKTRA: Wild ihr nach, faßt sie am Gewand.*
>
> *ELEKTRA: ohne sie zu hören.*
>
> *CHRYSOTHEMIS: schließt die Augen.*
>
> *ELEKTRA: an ihren Knieen.*
>
> *ELEKTRA: aufstehend.*
>
> *CHRYSOTHEMIS: will reden.*
>
> *ELEKTRA: hält ihr den Mund zu.*
>
> *CHRYSOTHEMIS: windet sich los.*
>
> *ELEKTRA: faßt sie wieder.*
>
> *ELEKTRA: hält sie am Gewand.*
>
> *CHRYSOTHEMIS: ins Haustor entspringend.*
>
> *ELEKTRA: ihr nach. Sie fängt an der Wand des Hauses, seitwärts der Türschwelle, eifrig zu graben an, lautlos, wie ein Tier. Hält inne, sieht sich um, gräbt wieder.* (p.216-19)

This immensely expressive pantomime accentuates the dialogue by showing non-verbally what has taken place between the two sisters: Elektra's desperate attempt to persuade her sister, Chrysothemis' terror, wish to escape and final refusal, Elektra's decision to proceed alone and her turning her plan into action by starting to excavate the murderous axe.

The first person to recognize Orest is an old servant. He says absolutely nothing to indicate his awareness of his master's return. Indeed, his silence is stressed twice (*lautlos*). (p.224) And yet his movements show that he knows Orest's identity, and express his loyalty, his eagerness to serve his master. His silence can also be interpreted as a sign of his awareness of the importance of keeping Orest's return secret. As words may betray Orest's plan, the only safe way for the old servant to show his affection is his choosing the way of gestures.

Orest has come back as the determined avenger of his father's death. However, matricide is by no means an easy task. His momentary hesitation is depicted on his face: *'Orest schließt einen Augenblick, schwindelnd, die Augen, der Pfleger ist dicht hinter ihm, sie tauschen einen schnellen Blick. Die Tür schließt sich hinter ihnen.'* (p.229) After that moment of weakness, again almost impossible to express in words, he goes inside to perform his deed. Elektra remains outside waiting. Her mixed feelings of excitement, fear and impatient expectation as well as her inability to be of any assistance, are stated not by her words but the way she moves: *'Elektra allein, in entsetzlicher Spannung. Sie läuft auf einem Strich vor der Tür hin und her, mit gesenktem Kopf, wie das gefangene Tier im Käfig.'* (p.229)

Dance

The most effective method of non-verbal expression in Hofmannsthal's play is dance. Similar to the technique of gestures and at the same time a verbal and visual leitmotif, Elektra's dance dominates the play. Once again the connection with ancient Greek dramaturgy is obvious, as ritualistic dance used to be the principal element of Greek theatre. Details about the ceremonies in the honour of god Dionysus are not known to us, partly because of their mystic character. What was known is that their main element was an orgiastic dance, with no particular steps, where all the dancers were allowed to express themselves freely in any way they thought appropriate under the deafening sound of primitive music. The essence of this dance with its very distinct sexual character was to celebrate birth, death and rebirth, all three symbolized by Dionysus. As time went by, the importance of this laudatory dance faded away and all that remained in the tragedies and comedies was their ritualistic identity, mostly indicated through the gestures of the actors.

However, with his *Elektra* Hofmannsthal seems to be going back to a time when dance still had the highest position in the pyramid of expressive means. As a verbal leitmotif, dance occurs for the first time in Elektra's vision of revenge. As it is described here, this dance can only be defined as Dionysian: wild, free, orgiastic, triumphant, celebrating a death the outcome of which has been rebirth. Elektra seems to have identified Agamemnon with Dionysus: her father is to her a bloodthirsty god who asks his worshippers for human sacrifices and then thanks them by presenting them with the power to dance. It is not a dance of joy, but rather one of a wild triumph, performed in utter ecstasy:

und wir,

dein Blut, dein Sohn Orest und deine Töchter,

wir drei, wenn alles dies vollbracht und Purpur-

gezelte aufgerichtet sind, vom Dunst

des Blutes, den die Sonne an sich zieht,

dann tanzen wir, dein Blut, rings um dein Grab:

und über Leichen hin werd ich das Knie

hochheben Schritt für Schritt, und die mich werden

so tanzen sehen,

[...]

die werden sagen: einem großen König

wird hier ein großes Prunkfest angestellt

von seinem Fleisch und Blut, und glücklich ist,

wer Kinder hat, die um sein hohes Grab

so königliche Siegestänze tanzen! (p.191)

There is no other reference to dance in the course of the play until just before the end, when after Klytämnestra's murder Elektra is escorting the second victim, Ägisth, into his death-trap:

ÄGISTH: was tanzest du? Gib Obacht.

ELEKTRA, indem sie ihn, wie in einem unheimlichen Tanz, umkreist, sich plötzlich tief bückend. (p.232)

This picture of Elektra dancing around Ägisth reminds us of her vision and makes us think that the time for the dance of triumph must be approaching. And indeed, after the

duty of the revenge has been fulfilled everything points to Elektra's vision coming true, as Chrysothemis shouts:

> *Er steht im Vorsaal, alle sind um ihn,*
> *sie küssen seine Füße, alle, die*
> *Ägisth im Herzen haßten, haben sich*
> *geworfen auf die andern, überall*
> *in allen Höfen liegen Tote, alle,*
> *die leben, sind mit Blut bespritzt und haben*
> *selbst Wunden, und doch strahlen sie, alle, alle*
> *umarmen sich* - (p.232)

The only element missing is the dance itself, the importance of which seems to be realized only by Elektra. The others are so occupied with praising the brave hero and with celebrating their own freedom. Their celebration is an expression of their joy at their having been liberated from the usurpers and is not in the least related to the avenging of their king's death. Agamemnon is not the issue; what matters is that Ägisth, the tyrant, is dead. Only Elektra regards it as a tribute to her dead father's memory, only she sees the necessity of a ritualistic dance, in which she has to be the protagonist: *'alle warten sie/ auf mich: ich weiß doch, daß sie alle warten,/ weil ich den Reigen führen muß.'* (p.232) In reality, nobody is waiting for her, nobody even remembers her. She thinks that she is at last living out her vision but what is actually happening is the enslaved people's celebration of their liberator's victory. This is indicated by the words of Chrysothemis, who cannot understand her sister's odd behaviour: *'hörst du nicht, sie tragen ihn,/ sie tragen ihn auf ihren Händen, allen/ sind die Gesichter ganz verwandelt, allen/ schimmern die Augen und die alten Wangen/ von Tränen! Alle weinen, hörst dus nicht?'*. (p.233) However, it is too late for Elektra to come out of her trance. She has failed to perform the

deed she was always talking of, the only thing left to her now is to dance her solitary, ritualistic dance: *'Elektra hat sich erhoben. Sie schreitet von der Schwelle herunter. Sie hat den Kopf zurückgeworfen wie eine Mänade. Sie wirft die Kniee, sie recht die Arme aus, es ist ein namenloser Tanz, in welchem sie nach vorwärts schreitet.'* (p.233) But Elektra's dance has nothing in common with the orgiastic ceremony described in her vision: it is a lonely performance, the ultimate expression of Elektra's inability to adjust to her place and time, her inability to step out of her phantasy-world, her death dance. Stressing for the last time the delivering, cathartic power of dance, she collapses:

> *Schweig und tanze. Alle müssen*
> *herbei! hier schließt euch an! Ich trag die Last*
> *des Glückes und ich tanze vor euch her.*
> *Wer glücklich ist wie wir, dem ziemt nur eins: schweigen und tanzen!*
> *[...]*
> *Sie tut noch einige Schritte des angespanntesten Triumphes und stürzt zusammen.* (p.234)

Dancing, Elektra reaches her death, offering herself as the last sacrifice to her god to prove her undying love.

CHAPTER THREE:
THE CULTURAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND OF EUGENE O'NEILL'S *MOURNING BECOMES ELECTRA*

Greek Influence

'If in three or four years I'm able to read Greek tragedy in the original and enjoy it, I'll have made a grand refuge for my soul to dive deeply and coolly into at moments when modern life - and drama - become too damn humid and shallow to be born', O'Neill told his friend and editor, Manuel Komroff, at Boni and Liveright, when that house was publishing his plays in 1926, just a few years before he started working on *Mourning Becomes Electra.*[1] However, this is not the first indication of his interest in Greek tragedy. In some handwritten notes, which were undated but judging from his handwriting pretty early, he mentioned his intention to write a play about Aischylos. He had noted down some of Aischylos' biographical details, his theatrical innovations and the fact that he was influenced by Pythagorean philosophy. There is no further evidence that he ever wrote such a play; but it might also be suggestive that O'Neill intended to write a play on Aischylos and not the other two Greek dramatists. A probable explanation may be the fact that Aischylos was chronologically closer to the genesis of Greek tragedy: theatre for him had a religious character, something that O'Neill missed in modern theatre and wished to see re-established, as Franz H. Link suggests in his article 'Eugene O'Neill und die Wiedergeburt der Tragödie aus dem Unterbewußten':

> Ein religiöses Drama in dem soweit angedeuteten Sinne glaubt O'Neill schaffen zu können durch ein Anknüpfen an die griechische Tragödie, wie

[1] Arthur and Barbara Gelb, *O'Neill* (London: Cape, 1962), p.699.

> sie aus dem Geiste des Dionysuskultes entstand, und durch deren Umsetzen in die Gegenwart mit Hilfe der Psychologie.[2]

This might also explain why *Mourning Becomes Electra* has the form of a trilogy and can therefore be considered as a play modelled on the *Oresteia*, something that the playwright himself acknowledges in an undated letter to the theatre historian and critic Arthur Hopson Quinn:

> The Trilogy of Aeschylus is what I had in mind. As for individual characters, I did not consciously follow any of the Greek dramatists. On the contrary, I tried [...] to forget all about their differing Electras. All I wanted to know was the theme-pattern of Aeschylus (and the old legends) and to reinterpret it in modern psychological terms [...] with the Fate and the Furies working from within the individual soul.[3]

Nevertheless, Barrett H. Clark in his article 'Aeschylus and O'Neill' mentions another reason for O'Neill's turning to Aischylos: 'It is likely that O'Neill turned to Aeschylus because the Greek had at hand a set of conventions that enabled him to present certain aspects of life that seemed important, without having to explain too much of the background or history of his characters'.[4] However, the same would apply for all the Greek dramatists, so there must be a more specific reason for O'Neill's selecting Aischylos' *Oresteia* as his model-play. The fact that O'Neill was seeking religion in theatre may be explained by the religious upbringing he received as a child, due to which he started off his career as a religious playwright and reached a stage where he believed

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[2] Franz H. Link, *Eugene O'Neill und die Wiedergeburt der Tragödie aus dem Unterbewußten* (Frankfurt a.M.: Athenäeum, 1967), p.2.
[3] The undated letter comes from the Eugene O'Neill archives held in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University.
[4] Barrett H. Clark, 'Aeschylus and O'Neill', *The English Journal*, 21 (1932), 699-710, (p.701).

himself to have achieved union with God. But the shattering discoveries that his father had an illegitimate child, that his brother was turning into an alcoholic, and, worst of all, that his mother had been a drug-addict for years, undoubtedly contributed to a spiritual crisis which brought about a change in him. In 1903 he stopped attending church and soon afterwards he lost his faith. This is when the Greek spirit gradually started becoming his religion; to recreate the Greek spirit in modern life was the goal he set for himself. Thus it is not surprising that the theatre became his church. He often spoke of his vision: he dreamt of the theatre as a living church, the one church left to modern man after 'the death of the old God and the failure of science and materialism to give any satisfactory new one.' In an unpublished Author's Foreword to his play *The Great God Brown* he states: 'The theatre should stand as apart from existence as the church did in the days when it was the church. It should give us what the church no longer gives us -a meaning. In brief, it should return to the spirit of the Greek grandeur.'[5] Similarly, he confided to the playwright Paul Green in late 1926 his desire and intention to write plays in which the audience could participate in much the same way as a congregation does in a church service. And in a letter to Arthur Hobson Quinn, probably written in 1925, he declared it his ambition

> to see the transfiguring nobility of tragedy, in as near the Greek sense as one can grasp it, in seemingly the most ignoble debased lives. And just here is where I am a most confirmed mystic, too, for I'm always, always, trying to interpret Life in terms of lives, never just lives in terms of character. I'm always acutely conscious of the Force behind - Fate, God, our biological past creating our present, whatever one calls it - Mystery certainly - of the one eternal tragedy of Man in his glorious, self-

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[5] Egil Törnqvist, *A Drama of Souls. Studies in O'Neill's Super-naturalistic technique* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), p.26.

> destructive struggle to make the Force express him instead of being, as an animal is, an infinitesimal incident in its expression. And my profound conviction is that this is the only subject worth writing about and that it is possible - or can be - to develop a tragic expression in terms of transfigurated modern values and symbols in the theatre which may to some degree bring home to members of a modern audience their ennobling identity with the tragic figures on the stage. Of course, this is very much of a dream, and the Greek dream in tragedy is the noblest ever![6]

On the evidence of this particular letter, and bearing in mind O'Neill's concept of theatre, it would be perfectly justifiable to conclude that O'Neill was certainly not writing his plays for the audience of his era, people who were accustomed to mediocre spectacles and were easily satisfied with a repertoire dominated by light entertainment and sentimental and sensational pieces, such as *The Count of Monte Cristo* by Alexandre Dumas, a play in which O'Neill's father James O'Neill starred for over thirty years. In his article about O'Neill Franz H. Link mentions a passage which indicates the dramatist's intention to innovate the traditional theatre and goes on to suggest that what O'Neill was trying to highlight with his plays was the connection between man and God:

> 'Most modern plays are concerned with the relation between man and man, but that does not interest me at all. I am only interested in the relation between man and God.' [...] O'Neill wendet sich mit diesen Worten gegen das Drama, das er am Anfang seines Schaffens das Broadway-Theater beherrschen sah und stellt sich in die Reihe der europäischen Expressionisten, die in ähnlicher Weise wie er um das Verhältnis des Menschen zum Unendlichen, zu Gott rangen. Wie bei den Expressionisten

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[6] Törnqvist, *A Drama of Souls*, p.14.

> ist dieses Verhältnis für O'Neill nicht vorgegeben, sondern prinzipiell problematisch.[7]

O'Neill's plays referred to the spectators of the future, they were created for an *imaginary theatre*. He was aiming at stirring the emotions rather than the intellect of his audience. But he was also writing the roles for imaginary actors, who could come in existence only in his own mind, and this is why he was almost always dissatisfied with the stage-productions of his plays, however good they may have been. The fact that the actors were different from the ones his mind had conceived made his plays appear so foreign to him that he expressed his wish to prohibit their production in order to save himself from the disappointment he often experienced. In 1924 he told an interviewer:

> I hardly ever go to the theatre, although I read all the plays I can get. I don't go to the theatre because I can always do a better production in my mind than one on the stage... Nor do I ever go to see any of my own plays - have seen only three of them since they started coming out. My real reason for this is that I was practically brought up in the theatre - in the wings - and I know all the technique of acting. I know everything that everyone is doing from the electrician to the stage hands. So I see the machinery going around all the time unless the play is wonderfully acted and produced. Then, too, my own plays all the time I watch them I am acting all the parts and living them so intensely that by the time the perfomance is over I am exhausted - as if I had gone through a clothes wringer.[8]

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[7] Link, p.1.
[8] Törnqvist, *A Drama of Souls*, p.23.

In an article in the *News Front* of May, 1969 with the title 'The Tormented Genius, Eugene O'Neill, innovator of the modern American theatre, lived the tragedies he wrote', the cathartic quality of O'Neill's plays is mentioned in connection with his own life so full of agony:

> While O'Neill's plays were inevitably fascinating, they were not easy to follow and certainly not pleasant entertainment. Like Greek tragedies, they offer catharsis through terror and pity, although sometimes individual lines are lustily funny. Primarily, they project the playwright's passionate and tormented self-hurl a life full of agony across the footlights.[9]

And yet, though he himself found this experience extremely exhausting, this catharsis is exactly what he was hoping his spectators would go through. And he knew of only two audiences who would be capable of taking this revitalizing, psychic bath: the ancient Greek audience, and the audience of the future, which, however, existed only in his mind.

O'Neill's trilogy *Mourning Becomes Electra* is based on a well-known Greek myth, and the playwright did nothing to conceal the obvious similarity. Furthermore, he considered it as a challenge to work on the ancient myth, which had served as the theme for many dramatists before him, and try to make the most of it in his era. In one of his articles, John Haynes Holmes suggests that both Bernard Shaw and Eugene O'Neill were in agreement as far as the importance of writing a play on an already well-known theme is concerned:

> He [Shaw] quotes one of his fellow-playwrights as saying that he is envious of the old Greek playwrights because the Athenians asked them not for some new and original device of the half-dozen thread-bare plots of

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[9] 'The tormented Genius, Eugene O'Neill, innovator of the modern American Theatre, lived the tragedies he wrote', *News Front*, May, 1969.

> the modern theatre, but for the deepest lesson that might be drawn from the familiar and sacred legends of their country. 'Let us all write', Mr Shaw quotes the playwright as saying, 'an Electra, an Antigone, an Agamemnon, and show what we can do with it.'[10]

Barrett H. Clark also mentions that in choosing a theme from Greek drama, O'Neill found the best medium for the expression of his ideas, as it offered him a wider field than any modern subject could have done.[11]

Apart from its title, the names of the characters in *Mourning Becomes Electra* also point directly to the trilogy's Greek source, as they derive from the ancient ones. O'Neill took great pains in choosing characteristic New England names which would at the same time be as close as possible to the original ones, without that similarity being too unnaturally obvious. After many names had been considered and dismissed, he decided on Ezra Mannon for Agamemnon, Christine for Clytemnestra, Orin for Orestes, Adam for Aigisthos. The name Lavinia seems at first sight unrelated to the Greek equivalent Electra, and although O'Neill himself made it clear in his notes that he had in mind the name Laodike, which Homer had used in reference to Agamemnon's elder daughter, the critics have come up with various explanations, as Joyce Deveau Kennedy notes in her article: 'Cyrus Day [...] has argued that *levin* means lightning or electricity, hence Electra; and Emil Tornquist agrees with Day but adds the derivation from Latin *lavare*, to wash - Lavinia being the one to "purge the sins of her family".'[12] The good-natured, supporting friend Pylades is the character behind Peter, and Hazel owes her existence to Hermione,

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[10] John Haynes Holmes, *Eugene O'Neill's Mourning Becomes Electra: Some Deeper Implications of the Drama* (New York: The Community Church, 1931-32), p.3.
[11] Clark, p.701.
[12] Joyce Deveau Kennedy, 'O'Neill's Lavinia Mannon and the Dickinson Legend', in *American Literature*, 49 (1977), 108-13, (p.108).

the daughter of Menelaos and Helen. Finally Seth, the old housekeeper is the modern equivalent of Orestes' pedagogue.

However, a number of major differences between O'Neill's adaptation of the Electra-myth and its ancient counterparts are to be noticed. Edwin Engel notes in his book *The Haunted Heroes of Eugene O'Neill* that O'Neill gave the leading role to his Electra following Euripides' example in antithesis to Aischylos and Sophocles:

> With respect to plot, O'Neill's most conspicuous departure from Aeschylus was his giving the central role to Lavinia rather than to Orin. In so doing he appears to have followed Euripides' *Electra*, not only diverging from Aeschylus, but also disregarding the *Electra* of Sophocles wherein brother and sister divided the part of protagonist.[13]

Although this view seems accurate enough as far as the Sophoclean and Aischylean plays are concerned, the suggested similarity between the Euripidean *Electra* and O'Neill's trilogy seems improbable, as both characters Electra and Orestes appear to have equally secondary roles in comparison to the protagonist Fate, who directs everyone's life.

Engel also mentions two further dissimilarities as far as two other characters in *Mourning Becomes Electra* are concerned: Christine and Peter. (p.254) The main difference between O'Neill's heroine and Clytemnestra is the fact that the latter justifies her crime as an act of revenge on her husband for the murder of her daughter Iphigeneia, a motif which appears in all three Greek treatments of the Electra-myth, whereas Christine's hatred towards Ezra and his Puritanism is her sole justification. Similarly, Lavinia's refusal to marry Peter intensifies the tragic quality of the last scene of the play, in antithesis to the happy ending of the Euripidean tragedy, where Pylades is ordered to

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[13] Edwin A. Engel, *The Haunted Heroes of Eugene O'Neill*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953), p. 247.

marry the tormented heroine. On this point Engel argues that 'When O'Neill refused to permit Lavinia to marry Peter, he was correcting what he felt was a fault in the *Electra* of Euripides.' (p.256)

Finally, Engel notices in O'Neill's plays a principal deviation from ancient Greek dramaturgy:

> The unfullfilment, exhaustion, and apathy which O'Neill's tragedies increasingly reflected were conditions completely foreign to Greek tragedy. The Greeks were never so contemptuous of life as to seek consolation in death, nor so afraid of death as to calm their fears by promising themselves the fullfilment after death of all that they had vainly yearned for in life. (p.256)

At this point he seems to be disregarding completely the character of Lavinia and her seeking happiness and fulfilment in life and love. And even when her attempt fails, she still prefers life and punishment to death and expiation.

O'Neill appears to have followed Aischylos' dramatic technique as he wrote a trilogy, (three plays on the same theme, something that Aischylos was famous for). He also made use of a theatrical device which was the main stylistic characteristic of ancient Greek dramaturgy in general: the element of chorus. In the beginning of each of the three plays O'Neill presents a group of townspeople who comment on the incidents of the previous scene, exactly as the ancient chorus did between the episodes. The first play, 'Homecoming', starts with a group of intruders, secretly brought to the grounds of the Mannon residence by Seth, the housekeeper, with whom they are acquainted: *'These last three are types of townsfolk rather than individuals, a chorus representing the town come to look and listen and spy on the rich and exclusive Mannons.'* (p.17)[14] It is significant

[14] All quotations are taken from Eugene O'Neill, *Mourning Becomes Electra* (London: Cape, 1989).

and certainly points to Greek drama that it is through this chorus that the Mannons, the protagonists, are presented to the audience. O'Neill may also have wanted to emphasize the similarity as he himself refers to the group of townspeople as *chorus*. Similarly, in the beginning of 'The Hunted', a group of people returning from Ezra Mannon's funeral, give us information about the state Christine Mannon is in before we actually see her:

> *These people - the Bardens, Hills and his wife and Doctor Blake - are as were the Ames of Act One of 'Homecoming', types of townfolk, a chorus representing as those others had, but in a different stratum of society, the town as a human background for the drama of the Mannons.* (p.117)

Furthermore, we find out from a group of people assembled outside the house that, after their mother's suicide, Lavinia and Orin left on a voyage and that the Mannon house has been deserted, ever since. There is some talk that the house is haunted: *'These four - Ames, Small, Silva and Mackel - are, as it were, the townsfolk of the first act of "Homecoming" and "The Hunted" a chorus of types representing the town as a human background for the drama of the Mannons.'* (p.209)

Another external element of the trilogy which strongly calls to mind the ancient Greek theatre, is the stage-setting which according to Egil Törnqvist is not coincidental, but rather the playwright's intention: 'The attempt on O'Neill's part to find a counterpart for the classical "stage" -the lawn roughly corresponding to the orchestra (O'Neill's "choruses" on the whole keep to the lawn) and the house to the skéné - is obvious from this description.'[15] This motif will be discussed in detail in the section about O'Neill's selection of stage-setting.

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[15] Egil Törnqvist, *Symbolism in the Plays of Eugene O'Neill* (Uppsala: Uppsala University Press, 1968), p.321.

Apart from these merely stylistic, exterior elements, O'Neill also made use of motifs based on Greek philosophy and religion. The most important of these, - it may be traced throughout the whole trilogy - is the concept of Fate. Notwithstanding the fact that the ancient Greeks had proved to themselves that their trust in their own free will and power could achieve miracles, they could never become totally released from their belief in Fate, which they had deified: the three goddesses, the Moirai, the personification of Fate, directed everyone's life and actions. O'Neill seems to have taken over this fatalistic attitude, and to have created characters who believe in a supernatural, overwhelming power, as Allen Churchill in an article about him also suggests: 'O'Neill's plays were, with only one exception, deeply pessimistic and tragic. He did not believe that man was the master of his fate, but rather that Destiny pushed him around.'[16] In his study on O'Neill, Sophus Keith Winther stresses the same point: 'In O'Neill's plays free will is a negligible quantity, for his tragedies are not the result of an uncaused free choice.'[17] Nevertheless, it is significant that he declared his intention to find a modern equivalent for the ancient concept of Fate, because it was no longer valid in the modern era:

> Modern audiences, says O'Neill, have no general religious basis, no common fund of tradition to which they may refer the greatest problems with which we are all concerned. The closest modern equivalent is our yet - infant science of psychology; fate, says O'Neill, is what happens to human beings because of what they are, not what some god tells them to be, and it is the business of the tragic dramatist to show how human destiny resides in the individual, the family, the race.[18]

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[16] Allen Churchill, 'Eugene O'Neill, some early influences that shaped him as a playwright and as a man' *Esquire*, June, 1957.
[17] Sophus Keith Winther, *Eugene O'Neill: A critical study* (New York: Random House, 1934), p.151.
[18] Clark, p.709.

It is obvious that O'Neill tried to substitute the ancient concept of Fate with psychological fate as many of the commentators on his plays have suggested. Jeffrey Hirsch considers the employment of *psychological fate* as O'Neill's greatest innovation:

> By far O'Neill's greatest innovation in updating the *Oresteia* is the substitution of psychological imperatives for the belief in the gods, divine intervention and retribution that informed his Aeschylean source. The characters in *Mourning Becomes Electra* are not victims of fate like their Greek counterparts, but of their own psyches. [...] The playwright reminded himself in his work diary to develop the passions of his characters 'always remembering fate from within the family is modern psychological approximation of the Greek conception of fate from without, from the supernatural.' [...] 'A hell of a problem, a modern tragic interpretation of classic fate without the benefit of gods -' the playwright admitted.[19]

It is evident that all the characters in *Mourning Becomes Electra* are driven by an overwhelming power, even if it comes from inside them, and is not supernatural as it was in Greek tragedies. The first indication of this is the title of the trilogy, as O'Neill explains in his *Notes from a Fragmentary Work Diary*:

> Title: - *Mourning Becomes Electra* - that is, in old sense of word - it befits - it becomes Electra to mourn - it is her fate, - also, in usual sense (made ironical here), mourning (black) is becoming to her - it is the only color that becomes her destiny.[20]

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[19] Jeffrey Hirsch, 'Electra Redux', *American Conservatory Theatre* (1928), 12-18, (p.16).
[20] His diary is held in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale.

In addition, all the characters seem to be aware of the fact that they do not rule their own lives and that all their actions are predetermined, as Friedrich Brie suggests:

> Im Gegensatz zu den Gestalten des herkömmlichen psychoanalytischen Romans, wo die Menschen sich der atavistischen Einflüsse zumeinst nicht bewußt sind und im allgemeinen eine mehr passive Natur zeigen, sind die Gestalten bei O'Neill zumeist wissend und in ihrem Kampfe gegeneinander im höchsten Grade aktiv und vital, zum Teil gerade auch in Aufbäumung gegen dieses Wissen.[21]

Christine Mannon, although it is made clear that murdering Ezra was her idea, senses a certain power leading her towards this decision: *'I've been reading a book in Father's medical library. I saw it there one day a few weeks ago - it was as if some fate in me forced me to see it!'* (p.70), she tells Adam Brant while explaining to him her plan about poisoning her husband. The expression *forced me* implies that when she conceived the idea of the murder, she was acting under the influence of a certain power, which she herself defines as *fate*. It is also significant that she refers to *some fate in me*, which indicates her awareness of the fact that her fate is not an external, supernatural force, but rather internal, psychological, coming from within. Similarly, she exclaims: *'Why can't all of us remain innocent and loving and trusting? But God won't leave us alone. He twists and wrings and tortures our lives with others' lives until we poison each other to death!'* (p.122) Again she senses the same strong power leading her astray without her being able to prevent it, no matter how perfectly calculated her actions may be: *'I'd planned it so carefully - but something made things happen!'* (p.181) She commits suicide in the end,

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[21] Friedrich Brie, 'Eugene O'Neill als Nachfolger der Griechen (Mourning Becomes Electra)' in *Germanisch-Romanische Monatschrift*, 21 (1933), 45-49, (p.46).

admitting that the power against which she was fighting was impossible to defeat, something she had dreaded all along:

> *For God's sake, keep Orin out of this! He's still ill! He's changed! He's grown hard and cruel! All he thinks of is death! Don't tell him about Adam! He would kill him! I couldn't live then! I would kill myself.* (pp.151-52)

Adam Brant is another character who appears completely controlled by fate, even though at first he believes that he is acting according to his free will. He believes that stealing Christine from Ezra was his own decision:

> *I remember that night we were introduced and I heard the name Mrs. Ezra Mannon! By God, how I hated you then for being his! I thought, by God, I'll take her from him and that'll be part of my revenge! And out of that hatred my love came! It's damned queer, isn't it?* (p.64)

He thinks that falling in love with Christine was *queer*, and fails to see that it was fatal. Meeting her and becoming her accomplice in Ezra's murder marked the beginning of his end: he was destined to abandon the sea he so much loved; he was drawn to Christine and death in the same strange, inexplicable way that she was drawn to the book she found in her father's library. Although the fate neither of them are able to escape is psychological, it is also determined by an outside factor: heredity. It is a family destiny, rather than a personal fate that the characters are struggling against. Christine is following the steps of her archetype Marie Brantôme, Adam Brant has the same fate as his father, David Mannon.

Ezra Mannon is also a character who seems to have fallen in the trap of the family fate. However, in his case the fate he cannot escape is his family's puritanical attitude towards life, which prevents him from expressing his feelings clearly:

> *Something queer in me keeps me mum about the things I'd like most to say - keeps me hiding the things I'd like to show. Something keeps me sitting numb in my own heart - like a statue of a dead man in a town square.'* (p.94)

When he finally realizes the pressure he had been living under all his life and which has transformed him into a hateful creature in the eyes of Christine, the woman whose love he tried to gain more than anything in his life, he also tries in vain to escape. Sophus Keith Winther comments on this point:

> General Mannon had to live to old age and go through two wars before he realized that he had been the victim of a tragic ideal. Love as an end in itself had gradually found a home in his heart. But too late. Even as he talks of the new happiness that he thinks is in store for him now that he has triumphed over the tyranny of death, the reality of it hangs over him ready to receive him into its black shroud before the redstreaked dawn shall welcome the new day.[22]

Of all the male Mannons, Orin is the only one who fights against his fate, and up to a certain point he appears to have defeated it. His pathological affection for Christine is far more than an unnatural lust, or an Oedipus-complex. It is his desperate attempt to break free from the Mannon destiny. His paranoic fear that he is losing Christine, his only protection against the Mannons' puritanism, forces him to kill her lover. And this is the

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[22] Winther, p.51.

crucial point where fate gains power over him: Christine commits suicide and Orin finds himself unprotected. He then starts writing the history of all the family crimes, hoping that once he had traced back the hidden power that urged the Mannons to commit them, he can predict his own fate and escape it:

> *Yes! I've tried to trace to its secret hiding-place in the Mannon past the evil destiny behind our lives! I thought if I could see it clearly in the past I might be able to foretell what fate is in store for us, Vinnie - but I haven't dared predict that - not yet - although I can guess* - (p.248)

But he only succeeds in seeing clearly that he is too much of a Mannon to have any hope of salvation. His turning to Lavinia who, by then, has become for him everything that Christine used to be, proves itself to be a utopian idea, a repetition of Ezra's unsuccessful attempt to escape his fate with Christine's help: *'Can't you see I'm now in Father's place and you're Mother? That's the evil destiny out of the past I haven't dared predict! I'm the Mannon you're chained to!'* (p.252) He commits suicide convinced that this is the only way out, as the Mannon dead will cease haunting him once he has become one of them.

Lavinia is the most tragic character of all. In contrast to all the other Mannons who are fighting against the Mannon destiny, she seems to be doing her utmost to behave like an original Mannon. She suppresses her nature, inherited from Christine, and adopts the puritanical attitude towards life of her father. Only after Christine's death does she realize that being a Mannon signifies being dead, and starts revolting not only against the Mannons but against her former self as well. She finally succeeds in releasing herself from her fixation about being her father's daughter through the delivering power of the *Blessed Isles* of pure, sinless love. And this is when the Mannon curse falls upon her; the family fate forbids her desire for happiness. Due to her own nature, Lavinia turns out to be a strong enemy:

ORIN:

(turns and addresses the portraits on the wall with a crazy mockery). You hear her? You'll find Lavinia Mannon harder to break than me! You'll have to haunt and hound her for a lifetime! (p.269).

She is determined to live in spite of everything:

(She turns to go and her eyes catch the eyes of the Mannons in the portraits fixed accusingly on her - defiantly). Why do you look at me like that? Wasn't it your only way to keep your secrets, too? But I've finished with you for ever now, do you hear? I'm Mother's daughter - not one of you! I'll live in spite of you! (p.272)

Through the pure love of Peter, whom she intends to marry, she is determined to find bliss: *'We'll go away and leave it alone to die - and we'll forget the dead!'* (p.28) But the Mannon fate is too strong even for Lavinia. In her desperate attempt to find love and happiness the ghosts of the past appear so vivid in front of her eyes, that she realizes that her fight has been in vain: *'I can't marry you, Peter. You mustn't ever see me again. [...] Love is not permitted to me. The dead are too strong!'* (p.285) Lavinia, as the last Mannon, cannot even have the privilege of death. Ezra, Adam, Christine, Orin, all of them found in death the peace they could not find in life, their death purified them. But Lavinia is the one cursed to pay for all their crimes. There is nobody left to punish her; she becomes Fate and punishes herself:

Living alone here with the dead is a worse act of justice than death or prison! I'll never go or see anyone! I'll have the shutters nailed close so no sunlight can ever get in. I'll live alone with the dead, and keep their

secrets, and let them hound me, until the curse is paid out and the last Mannon is let die! (p.288)

The fate of Orin and Lavinia is also determined by another factor: the parent-child relationship. In Christine's and Adam Brant's case it was mainly heredity they were struggling against, and Ezra was governed by his puritanical conscience. Orin's and Lavinia's psychological fate can be defined as their unnatural love for their parents of the opposite sex. Lavinia is destined not to be able to break free from her father's image. That is what attracts her in Adam, that is what she fails to find in Peter, whom she finally has to give up. That is what she means when she exclaims *'the dead are too strong.'* In a similar way, Christine has been following Orin throughout his life. His incestuous proposal to Lavinia was just an attempt to be united with his mother, as was his suicide: he shot himself as he could see that his mother's ghost would make life unbearable for him. Doris Alexander stresses this point in her study on the meaning of psychological fate in O'Neill's trilogy:

> [First] O'Neill appears to place psychological Fate in the Puritan conscience. Immediately after this first statement however, comes a second and quite different idea. [...] In this second statement O'Neill seems to place fate in the parent-child relationship. Out of a synthesis of these two ideas, fate in the Puritan conscience, and fate in the relationship between parent and child, O'Neill constructed his psychological fate.[23]

Another Greek element which O'Neill seems to have considered of major importance is the cult of Mother-Earth, the Eternal Woman with the delivering, purifying power. Before the belief in the twelve Olympian gods was established as the main

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[23] Doris M. Alexander, 'Psychological Fate in *Mourning Becomes Electra*', *PMLA*, 68 (1953), 923-34, (p.923).

religion of Greece, Mother-Earth was regarded as the most important deity. Everything was created by her, she was the only one who could rule the lives of gods and humans. Although this superiority gave way to the predominance of the Olympian gods, Mother-Earth was not in the least forgotten; she was replaced by the Olympian version of herself, Demeter. Even the name of the goddess proves her origin: Demeter is the development of *Ge-Meter*, where *Ge* means Earth and *Meter* Mother. The fact that Demeter was the goddess in whose honour the Eleusinian Mysteries were held is not accidental. The main principle of the Mysteries was that the superhuman power of the deified earth could revitalize the dead seeds and could help man to achieve a form of immortality.

The leitmotif of Woman as an object of worship in *Mourning Becomes Electra* is based on this particular belief. All the male characters of the play seek happiness, fulfilment and deliverance in a woman: Marie Brantôme, Christine and Lavinia, have exactly the same purifying function, as is suggested by Edwin Engel: 'In *Electra* the Mother is a primordial image, an archetypal experience shared by all of the Mannons. Thus, Lavinia is identified with her mother, Christine, and both are the image of Marie Brantôme.'[24] Marie Brantôme is the first to be mentioned as being a source of life. *'Marie? She was always laughin' and singin' - frisky and full of life with something free and wild about her like an animale.'* (p.77) These are Seth's words about Marie and it is the lust for this freedom, wildness and at the same time purity that urges Ezra, Adam and Orin to become attached to a woman who bears the same distinctive characteristics as Marie: Christine and later Lavinia. Significant proof of Eugene O'Neill's having been influenced by the Greek concept of Mother-Earth is the fact that all the male characters seem to connect the female characters with the *Blessed Isles* which recall the world of the Eleusinian Mysteries:

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[24] Engel, p.242.

Unless you've seen it, you can't picture the green beauty of their land set in the blue of the sea! The clouds like down on the mountain tops, the sun drowsing in your blood, and always the surf on the barrier reef singing a croon in your ears like a lullaby! The Blessed Isles, I'd call them! You can there forget all men's dirty dreams of greed and power! (p.44)

This is the vision that Adam Brant has of the Islands which he immediately associates with Lavinia. Of course he means Christine and he is only pretending to be in love with Lavinia so that she would not suspect his affair with her mother. But without realizing it he states the truth: Lavinia belongs to the unbridled world of the *Blessed Isles*, she is the Woman. He believes himself to be attached only to Christine, but in reality he is captivated by all three for they are just three different expressions of the same person, the same image.

It is not only Adam who is attached to all women. Seth relates how even the puritanical General Ezra Mannon was infatuated with Marie Brantôme:

Oh, everyone took to Marie - couldn't help it. Even your Paw. He was only a boy then, but he was crazy about her, too, like a youngster would be. His mother was stern with him while Marie, she made a fuss over him and petted him. (p.77)

Ezra himself also states his feelings about Lavinia and Christine when he finally decides to put his Puritanism behind him: *'I turned to Vinnie, but a daughter's not a wife. [...] I love you. I loved you then, and all the years between, and I love you now.'* (p.94) And his dream like Adam's, is to take Christine to the *Blessed Isles* where she truly belongs: *'I've a notion if we'd leave the children and go off on a voyage together - to the other side of the world - find some island where we could be alone a while.'* (p.95)

Orin, the only Mannon who can see clearly the bond between Marie, Christine and Lavinia has also the clearest vision of the islands. He goes a step further than Ezra and Adam who simply expressed their desire to go there with Christine, as for him the islands are his mother, something which for Egil Törnqvist seems to be suggesting Orin's craving to return to his mother's womb: 'His position underlines the idea poetically conveyed in his words: that Orin is seeking peace in the maternal womb. The water surrounding the "mother island" on which Orin longs to be is the counterpart of the "Fruchtwasser im Leib seiner Mutter".'[25]

From Lavinia's description of the islands which *set her free*, we find out that they are as mysterious as the world of the Eleusinian ceremonies. In addition to that, the primitive, ecstatic dance of the naked natives strongly resembles the ritual of the Dionysian orgies. O'Neill seems to have combined the Eleusinian and Dionysian spirit in creating the world of the *Blessed Isles* where the Woman is being worshipped. The motif of the deified Mother having a delivering power is so strongly emphasized in *Mourning Becomes Electra* that Edwin Engel considers it as the main theme of the trilogy: 'The theme of *Mourning Becomes Electra* is man's yearning throughout his "death-in-life" - a life perverted by the worship of God the Father - for "death-birth-peace" - the reward for worshipping God the Mother.'[26]

Apart from these two major Greek motifs, O'Neill also makes use of some secondary ones. One is the Greek concept of guilt. According to the mythological tradition, the Furies - deities of Justice - would haunt a murderer until he confessed his crime and went through a purifying procedure. This idea is highlighted in the legend of the House of Atreus. Especially in Aischylos' *Oresteia* and Euripides' *Electra* the matricide Orestes is almost driven insane by his guilty conscience and a *deus ex machina*

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[25] Törnqvist, *Symbolism in the plays of Eugene O'Neill*, p.351.
[26] Engel, p.241.

is required to release him. O'Neill seems to have made use of this element of Greek dramatic tradition, although in a modified version. He dealt with it in exactly the same way he had done with the motif of Fate. The Furies exist but they come from within rather than being an external factor; as Jeffrey Hirsch says: 'The ancient avenging Furies are transfigured, through O'Neill's modernist sensibilities, into torturing consciences and debilitating feelings of guilt.'[27]

In *Mourning Becomes Electra* Orin is not led to suicide in a fit of remorse over Christine's death. Strictly speaking, he did not kill his mother, and his suicide is not an act committed primarily in guilt but rather in the hope of achieving reunion with her. At this point it is impossible not to recall Freud's theory expanded in his *Abriß der Psychoanalyse* where he defines the death-urge (*Todestrieb*) as a wish of a living human being to return to his former state, to the time before he was born, into his mother's womb.

Nevertheless, an element of guilt was detected in Orin, when he talks of Hazel's pure love for him: *'Because when I see love for a murderer in her eyes my guilt crowds up in my throat like poisonous vomit and I long to spit it out and confess.'* (p.246) It could be argued that these words are borrowed from Aischylos' *Cheophoroi*, where Orestes is surrounded by horrid-looking women in black, the Furies. But while Orestes is expecting expiation and salvation to come from the gods, O'Neill's Orin tries to transplant his guilt into his sister's soul, as if sharing it with her would make it more bearable: *'Were you hoping you could escape retribution? You can't! Confess and atone to the full extent of the law! That's the only way to wash the guilt of our mother's blood from our souls!'* (p.246) Even Lavinia can see through Orin's scheme to activate a feeling of guilt in her: *'Will you never lose your stupid guilty conscience! Don't you see how you torture me? You're becoming my guilty conscience, too!'* (p. 247) Orin is so obsessed about making

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[27] Hirsch, p.16.

Lavinia share his guilt that, when he realizes that it would be impossible to awaken a feeling of remorse in his sister about Christine's suicide, he makes an incestuous proposal to her so that they would be chained to each other in sin: *'how else can I be sure you won't leave me? You would never dare leave me - then! You would feel as guilty then as I do! You would be as damned as I am!'* (p.268) Before committing suicide and returning to his original Island of Peace, Christine, he tries for the last time to persuade Lavinia to confess: *'Vinnie! For the love of God, let's go and confess and pay the penalty for Mother's murder and find peace together!'* (pp.268-69) The irony is that after Orin's suicide Lavinia actually feels the guilt she could not feel while he was alive. She is the last Mannon; her decision to spend the rest of her life with the Mannon dead is her way of purification.

One big difference between O'Neill's trilogy and the ancient adaptations of the myth is the fact he does not make direct use of Clytemnestra's excuse for killing Agamemnon: his having sacrificed their daughter Iphigeneia. However, this motif appears concealed in Christine's hatred towards Ezra and Lavinia because of their having convinced Orin to join the war. According to the legend, Agamemnon, who had previously insulted the goddess Artemis by killing her sacred deer, had to sacrifice his daughter Iphigeneia to placate the goddess so that she would let the wind blow for the Greek fleet to depart for the Trojan War. It was Agamemnon's duty to sacrifice his daughter for the welfare of his country, something that Clytemnestra could never forgive. Similarly, Ezra and Lavinia considered Orin's enlistment in the Civil War to have been his duty as a Mannon, whereas Christine feels betrayed and interprets it as their attempt to take her son away from her:

CHRISTINE:

[...] I loved him until he let you and your father nag him into the war, in spite of my begging him not to leave me alone. [...] I know his leaving me was your doing principally, Vinnie!

LAVINIA:

It was his duty as a Mannon to go! He'd have been sorry the rest of his life if he hadn't! I love him better than you! I was thinking of him! (p.57)

Christine does not have to give an excuse for murdering Ezra Mannon. Her hatred is so deeply rooted that she does not need to justify her actions. However, she uses Orin's departure as an excuse for her adultery:

Well, I hope you realize I never would have fallen in love with Adam if I'd had Orin with me. When he had gone there was nothing left - but hate and a desire to be revenged - and a longing for love! And it was then I met Adam. (p.57)

O'Neill's use of so many ancient Greek elements is certainly not coincidental and proves his profound admiration for Greek dramaturgy.

Nietzsche's Influence

It was in the spring of 1907, five years after he had given up Catholicism, that O'Neill became acquainted with Nietzsche's philosophy. He then came across the English translation of *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, a book, which, according to a letter he wrote to the critic and poet essayist Benjamin de Cassares in 1927[28], influenced him more than any other book he had ever read. He often spoke of 'the death of the old God', probably quoting Nietzsche's words from the first part of *Also Sprach Zarathustra*: 'Dieser alte Heilige hat in seinem Walde noch nichts davon gehört, daß *Gott tot* ist!'[29], as Link says: 'Wie für Nietzsche ist für O'Neill der alte Gott tot. Ein neues Verhältnis zu dem wofür der alte Gott stand, muß gesucht werden.'[30] And when he conceived the idea of an imaginary audience, dreading that the spectators of his time would not be mature enough to understand the meaning of his plays, he resembled Nietzsche's Zarathustra who exclaimed, after having realized that his teaching was not appreciated: '"Da stehen sie", [...] "da lachen sie: sie verstehen mich nicht, ich bin nicht der Mund für diese Ohren."'[31] O'Neill's vision of an audience which would take part in the events taking place on the stage is reminiscent of Zarathustra's desire to find not followers but collaborators,[32] and an interview given by him in 1921 calls to mind Nietzsche's teaching about the *Übermensch*:

> Yes, I can almost hear the birth cry of the Higher Man in the theatre. There is a goal, blessedly difficult of attainment. And what will he be?... Well, the Higher Man of the Theatre will be a playwright, say. [...] He will have

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[28] Gelb, p.121.
[29] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Werke in drei Bänden*, 2, ed. by Karl Schlechta (Munich: Hanser, 1955), p.279.
[30] Link, p.1.
[31] Nietzsche, p.283.
[32] Nietzsche, p.289.

> grouped around him as fellow-workers in that theatre the most imaginative of all the artists in the different crafts. In no sense will he be their master, except his imagination of his work will be the director of their imaginations. He will tell them the inner meaning and spiritual significance of his play as revealed to him. He will explain the truth - the unity - underlying his conception. And then all will work together to express that unity. The playwright will not interfere except where he sees the harmony of his imaginative whole is threatened. Rather, he will learn from his associates, help them to set their imaginations free as they help to find in the actual theatre a medium everbroadening in which even his seven last solitudes may hope to speak and to be interpreted. And soon all of these would be Higher Man of the Theatre.[33]

This particular vision of O'Neill's about the perfect Theatre is almost certainly rooted in *Also Sprach Zarathustra*: 'Ich lehre euch den Übermenschen. Der Übermensch ist der Sinn der Erde. Euer Wille sage: der Übermensch *sei* der Sinn der Erde!'[34] O'Neill seems to have modified Nietzsche's idea in such a way that it would apply to his concept of an ennobled theatre.

By 1917 O'Neill had read several books by Nietzsche, amongst which was *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, which, according to his own notes, he found of extreme interest.[35] Nietzsche's view that 'Greek tragedy means the unsurpassed example of art' initiated O'Neill's obsession with Greek drama. The mystical, Dionysian experience of being, not an individual, but part of the Life Force, which Nietzsche found in the plays of Aischylos and Sophocles, O'Neill hoped to impart, through his plays, to a modern audience. Franz

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[33] Törnqvist, *A Drama of Souls*, p.25.
[34] Nietzsche, p.280.
[35] O'Neill's handwritten notes are held in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale.

Link maintains, however, that although Nietzsche had placed his hopes for the rebirth of tragedy on Richard Wagner and his music, O'Neill overlooked that point and focused primarily on Nietzsche's philosophy. [36]

'What did the Greeks have that we haven't got?', O'Neill wrote in his notes for *Lazarus Laughed.* 'First, faith in their own lives as symbols of life! [...] Hence, faith in their own nobility. Hence, faith in the nobility of Fate. Hence, in a word, True Faith.' Nietzsche helped him to perceive the principle of *True Faith* by filling his religious vacuum, by replacing his shattered belief in Catholicism with a strong faith in human power and free will. In a letter to his friend Mary Clark, dated 5.8.1923, he points out that in his struggle with fate 'the brave individual always wins, for fate can never conquer his - or her - spirit.'[37]

The influence of Nietzsche's philosophy on O'Neill can be traced in *Mourning Becomes Electra* and more specifically observed in two concepts which are developed in the play: the faith in man's free will and the motif of the *Blessed Isles*, which appears in connection with the Nietzschean concept of the Dionysian and the Apolline. As already stated, all the main characters of the play are fatalistic and are being led to destruction by a power they are unable to control. This is the reason for Franz Link to argue that O'Neill's trilogy is profoundly different from Nietzsche's teaching which stresses the importance of a person's will to live and enjoy life:

> Besteht der tragische Mythus bei Nietzsche im Bejahen des Lebens, das sich in seiner Individuation schon je zum Untergang bestimmt weiß, so beherrscht die Tragödie O'Neills die Trauer, daß die Erfüllung nur im

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[36] Link, p.3.
[37] Gelb, pp.260-261.

> Untergang möglich wird. Die Individuation bleibt unerfülltes Leben und kann als 'hopeless hope' nicht mehr gefeiert werden.[38]

Nevertheless, until the moment O'Neill's characters are finally forced to admit their defeat, all of them try to resist by employing their faith in their free will. Christine Mannon is unhappily married, forced to spend her life in a puritanical environment she hates. Instead of giving in she dares to fall in love and commit adultery with her husband's enemy. As Maurice M. LaBelle also points out: 'Christine Mannon's large and sensual mouth suggests her ardent desire to live and love which was thwarted by marriage. Courageously disregarding social mores, she takes a paramour, Adam Brant.'[39] Furthermore, she dares to organize and carry out Ezra's murder, which she thought would set her free. She also admits that it was her own fault that Lavinia started suspecting her love-affair with Adam: *'I never should have brought you to this house'* (p.66), she tells Adam Brant insinuating that but for her desire, her own choice to see her lover as frequently as possible, Lavinia would never have suspected them. Fate finally gains power over her, but she herself had done her utmost to prevent it.

Adam Brant, Ezra Mannon, Orin, are all acting according to their free will up to a certain point; they are constantly aware of the battle they are involved in and fight as hard as they can. It is their choice to become attached to Christine as a means of salvation, but their destiny proves to be stronger than they had expected. Lavinia does not only fight against Fate: she actually despises it and claims her independence, disregarding God's ability to forgive: *'I'm not asking God or anybody for forgiveness. I forgive myself.'* (p.281.) A certain similarity can be observed between her exclamation and 'the death of God' proclaimed by Nietzsche. Although in the end even she has to surrender to Fate, she

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[38] Link, p.34.

[39] Maurice M. Labelle, 'Dionysus and Despair: The Influence of Nietzsche upon O'Neill's Drama', *Educational Theatre Journal*, 25 (1973), 436-42, (p.441).

selects her punishment herself and becomes her own fate. O'Neill neither ignores nor underestimates the role of Fate: Lavinia has to be punished, but he makes her condemn herself almost out of her free will. She could have committed suicide or run away from the Mannon ghosts by confessing her crimes and let the human laws punish her, but she chooses to stay and pay out the curse of her ancestors. Maurice LaBelle also discusses in his study the inability of all the characters in *Mourning Becomes Electra* to acquire happiness:

> Where, then, is happiness to be found? Certainly Christine and Ezra do not find it. Neither does their son, Orin. Unable to surmount his Oedipal infatuation for his mother or to overcome his guilt feelings he commits suicide. Only in Lavinia is there a hope for happiness, though it is quickly quashed. Conquering her Apollinian disgust of sex, she makes sinless, guiltless love with a native on a South Sea Island. To her, sex and love are 'sweet and natural'. Her liberty proves to be sweet - and short. Life quickly overpowers her ideals and she falls back into fear of social criticism. (p.441)

LaBelle further suggests that in *Mourning Becomes Electra* O'Neill deviates from what he calls 'Nietzsche's optimism' which could be observed in other plays he had written before, and creates an atmosphere of deep pessimism and death:

> Nietzsche's optimism which characterizes *The Hairy Ape* and *Desire under the Elms* is worn away by the end of *Mourning Becomes Electra.* Orin asks 'What right have I - or you to love?' Lavinia defiantly answers 'every right'. But she proves unable to act on the basis of her assertion; her milieu is the Mannon house, a temple dedicated to the past rather than to the

> emblem of Nietzsche's Eternal Present and the noontide of life, the sunrise. For Aeschylus, whose *Oresteia* was the pattern for *Mourning Becomes Electra*, suffering leads to wisdom; for O'Neill, agony breeds masochism and death. (p.441)

The rightness of this suggestion is doubtful as, firstly, it is not clear what the commmentator means by 'Nietzsche's optimism' and, secondly, there are hardly any elements of optimism in *Desire under the Elms*, one of the gloomiest tragedies O'Neill ever wrote. It is also worth mentioning that notwithstanding the general pessimistic atmosphere of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, a certain kind of optimism can be detected in O'Neill's trilogy in the motif of the recurrent *Blessed Isles*, one more Nietzschean element. The world of the *Blessed Isles*, apart from being a modern version of the Eleusinian and Dionysian Mysteries, is also related to one chapter of the second part of *Also Sprach Zarathustra* titled 'Auf den glückseligen Inseln'. Nietzsche's Zarathustra urges his listeners to forget about the preconceived world ruled by God and create a world of their own, a world of freedom and bliss, with no one to predetermine their lives, a world governed by the *Higher Man*, a man-made creature[40]. O'Neill's *Blessed Isles* is the dream-place of all his characters, who are desperately trying to escape from the world they were born in where Fate (or God) is directing their lives. They too desire to become the *Higher Man* living free and happy in a world without sin and evil. Franz H. Link also stresses the importance of that element by referring to a number of writers who also made use of it:

> Eine ähnliche Bedeutung als romantische Flucht in die Primitivität wie bei O'Neill gewinnt das Südseeinselmotiv etwa in Hofmannsthals Dialog 'Furcht'. Nahe liegt bei O'Neill auch eine Verbindung mit den 'Glücklichen

[40] Nietzsche, p.343.

> Inseln' in Nietzsches *Zarathustra*. Eine Reihe anderer Quellen kämen in Frage. Das Motiv hat eine lange Geschichte und geht letztlich zurück zu Hesiod. [41]

As already mentioned, the motif of the *Blessed Isles* occurs in connection with the deified Woman, the symbol of freedom, sinless love, happiness and deliverance. This Woman, who in the trilogy finds at first expression in the characters of Marie Brantôme and Christine and later in Lavinia, is characterized by a strong sexual drive and can be defined as Dionysian. LaBelle points out that O'Neill seems to have borrowed this element from Nietzsche and used it as a counter motif to the one of Apollonianism, observed in Lavinia's initial puritanism and lack of sensuality: 'Although eventually unable to share Nietzsche's love of life, O'Neill continued to rely heavily on the Apollinian - Dionysian dichotomy. [...] The antithesis of Christine's Dionysianism is the Apollonianism which her daughter, Lavinia, epitomizes.'[42] He further suggests that Ezra Mannon is led to destruction because of his inability to choose between Christine's Dionysian nature and Lavinia's Apolline behaviour. O'Neill makes clear in his trilogy that Dionysianism (symbolized by the *Blessed Isles*) is liberating, purifying and the only way to love, life and bliss whereas Apollonianism (represented by the grotesque Mannon residence) is destructive and suffocating and eventually proves to be stronger than Dionysianism as none of the characters manage to escape it. At this point O'Neill departs greatly from Greek Tragedy, the main characteristic of which was the harmony between the two elements. Franz Link arrives at the same conclusion:

> Auf diesem Hintergrund gesehen kann O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* nicht als Erneuerung der antiken Tragödie, sondern als deren

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[41] Link, p.34.
[42] LaBelle, p.440.

> Umkehrung betrachtet werden. Die Ballance zwischen dem Dionysischen und Apollinischem, die die antike Tragödie wahrte und von der sie lebte, ist aufgelöst durch die Verhärtung des appolinischen Prinzips, in dem O'Neillschen Drama repräsentiert durch den 'puritanical sense of guilt', der zur 'sexual frustration' führt.[43]

This deviation from both Greek Tragedy and Nietzschean philosophy can partly be attributed to the influence August Strindberg and his pessimistic plays had upon O'Neill.

[43] Link, p.33.

Strindberg's Influence

It was in the winter and spring of 1914, while staying at the Gaylord Sanatorium in Connecticut, that O'Neill discovered Strindberg. His Nobel Prize acceptance speech given in 1936 in Sweden reveals the major role Strindberg's work played in his development as a playwright:

> It was reading his [Strindberg's] plays when I first started to write back in the winter of 1913-14 that, above all else, first gave me the vision of what modern drama could be, and first inspired me with the urge to write for the theatre myself. If there is anything of lasting worth in my work, it is due to that original impulse from him, which has continued as my inspiration down all these years since then - to the ambition I received then to follow in the footsteps of his genius as worthily as my talent may permit, and with the same integrity of purpose.[44]

Agnes Boulton, O'Neill's second wife, also made several references to her husband's interest in Strindberg, as Sophus Keith Winther suggests:

> She says that her husband was always aware of Strindberg's work and that he considered 'the author of *A Dream Play* and *The Dance of Death* a greater and more profound playright (sic) than Ibsen, whom he liked to belittle as being conventional and idealistic.'[45]

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[44] Eugene O'Neill's draft-manuscript of his Nobel acceptance speech is held in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale.

[45] Sophus Keith Winther, 'Strindberg and O'Neill: A Study of Influence', *Scandinavian Studies*, 31 (1959), 103-20, (p.103).

It was certainly on Strindberg's 'Intimate Theatre' - a theatrical group of people with innovating ideas - that O'Neill's vision of his 'Imaginary Theatre' was based and which he had in mind when he joined the 'Provincetown Players' in the summer of 1916. This group, which consisted of some radical intellectuals and artists, novelists, journalists, sculptors, teachers, architects, etc, who spent their summers in Provincetown, Massachusetts, began its activities very modestly in 1914. O'Neill arrived in Provincetown in 1916, apparently in the hope of having one of his sixteen plays he had already written produced, and eventually succeeded in having *Bound East for Cardiff*[46] staged. The production of this play, which took place in what was called 'The Wharf Theatre', a deserted old shed for fishing gear and boat repair, marked not only the beginning of O'Neill's career as a dramatist but also the dawn of a new era in the American Theatre, an era characterized basically by sincerity and integrity. A few years later the group moved to New York, and O'Neill suggested, thinking perhaps again of Srtindberg's 'Intimate Theatre' in Stockholm, that they should name their theatre 'The Playwright's Theatre'. It is in this theatre that O'Neill's first plays were successfully produced.

Strindberg's influence on O'Neill is not only to be traced in the area of stage production. When he made his début as a playwright in 1913, Naturalism and Symbolism were both vital forces in the American theatre. Expressionistic plays had been written and produced, but Expressionism was still hardly known outside Germany. Rather than enrol himself in any of these current movements, O'Neill tried from the very beginning to create a style of his own. The following extract from an interview he gave in 1922 indicates his intention:

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[46] *Bound East for Cardiff* was written during the years 1913-1914 and staged for the first time on the 3 November 1916.

> I intend to use whatever I can make my own to write about anything under the sun in any manner that fits or can be invented to fit the subject. And I shall never be influenced by any consideration but one: is it the truth as I know it - or, better still, feel it? If so, shoot, and let the splinters fly wherever they may. If not, not.[47]

He made a similar statement in one of his letters to Quinn, written in 1925:

> So, I'm really longing to explain and try and convince some sympathetic ear that I've tried to make myself a melting pot for all these methods, seeing some virtues for my ends in each of them, and thereby, if there is enough real fire in me, boil down to my own technique.[48]

Again, in 1933 he declared: 'I do not plan to use the method, whether it be naturalism or symbolism that happens to fit in with the sort of drama I am writing.'[49] It is significant that although O'Neill particularly avoided labelling his dramatic technique and always stated his independence as a playwright, he never stopped repeating that Strindberg had a deep influence upon him. Clara Blackburn in her article 'Continental Influences on Eugene O'Neill's expressionistic Dramas' considers this effect of Strindberg's on O'Neill as understandable and justifiable, as both writers were characterized by the same temperament and way of thinking.[50]

The point in O'Neill's theory of life where Strindberg's influence is most acutely observable is his concept of Fate, at which he arrived by developing Strindberg's 'behind life' quality. According to Strindberg, there was always an external, supernatural force

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[47] Törnqvist, *A Drama of Souls*, p.28.
[48] Törnqvist, *A Drama of Souls*, p.28.
[49] Törnqvist, *A Drama of Souls*, pp.28-29.
[50] Clara Blackburn, 'Continental Influences on Eugene O'Neill's expressionistic dramas', *American Literature*, 13 (1941), 109-33, (p.110).

ruling and determining a individual's life, something hidden under the surface, 'behind life'. This force Strindberg termed as the 'Powers' and O'Neill simply called 'Fate' or 'God'. The search for that mysterious power is the main thing the two writers had in common, as Clara Blackburn also suggests:

> Both the Swedish and the American dramatist have shown marked trends toward mysticism. Strindberg has told us a great deal about his search for God, and O'Neill likewise has expressed his belief in the 'impelling, inscrutable forces behind life'.(p.111)

However, it is very important for the correct appreciation and comprehension of O'Neill's plays to bear in mind that when O'Neill discovered Strindberg and his dramatic technique he did not depart from the influence of Nietzsche. He succeded in combining Strindberg's fatalism with Nietzsche's belief in man's free will and love for life and created contradictory characters such as Mary Tyrone in *Long Day's Journey into Night* and Lavinia Mannon in *Mourning Becomes Electra* who are led to destruction despite their will and attempt to live and enjoy life and who, furthermore, although appreciating correctly the role of Fate in their lives, blame their unhappiness on both themselves and others. It is worth mentioning that both characters were considered by O'Neill as expressions of his own self. That he himself had the same antithetic attitude towards life as his heroes is proved by a letter to his wife Agnes Boulton, written after their separation in 1928, in which he hesitates between blaming his wife and blaming his wife and himself:

> I am not blaming you. I have been to blame as much as you, perhaps more so. Or rather, neither of us is to blame. It is life which made us what we are... it is perhaps not in the nature of living life itself that fine beautiful

> things may exist for any great length of time, that human beings are fated to destroy just that in each other which constitutes their mutual happiness.[51]

O'Neill's words call to mind Mary Tyrone's tragic exclamation in *Long Day's Journey into Night*:

> None of us can help the things life has done to us. They're done before you realize it, and once they're done they make you do other things until at last everything comes between you and what you'd like to be, and you've lost your true self for ever.[52]

Similar are Christine's words in *Mourning Becomes Electra* when she realizes how Fate has poisoned her life with hatred:

> *Why can't all of us remain innocent and loving and trusting? But God won't leave us alone. He twists and wrings and tortures our lives with others' lives until - we poison each other to death!* (p.122)

O'Neill's use of autobiographical elements in his plays is another similarity to August Strindberg, who very often portrayed his own self in the tormented heroes of his plays. Winther observes that the main influence upon O'Neill was not from Strindberg's plays, but from his own life as depicted in his autobiography.[53] *Mourning Becomes Electra* in particular, apart from bearing very distinctive autobiographical elements of O'Neill's, which will be discussed further on, also includes certain aspects of Strindberg's biography, something that can hardly be coincidental:

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[51] Törnqvist, *A Drama of Souls*, p.15.
[52] Eugene O'Neill, *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (London: Cape, 1956), p.23.
[53] Winther, 'Strindberg and O'Neill: A study of Influence', p.114.

> Strindberg describes himself 'like one possessed; he wants something, but does the opposite; he suffers from the desire to do himself injury, and finds almost a pleasure in self-torment'. Every problem of childhood, love of mother, sex, the father-mother relationship furthered his sense of unworthiness. He felt a sense of doom imposed because of his self-inflicted sex-sin. [...] He develops the torturing experience of loving his mother, and somehow making her sad rather than happy. He blames himself for the evils others impose on him. He resents his own acts and at the same time defends them. He wants to love, but this love finds expression in hate. (p.115)

However, apart from Strindberg's biographical details, which undoubtedly had a major effect on O'Neill, the creation of *Mourning Becomes Electra* seems to have also been written under the influence of one of Strindberg's plays, which was regarded by O'Neill himself as the drama which initiated his desire to become a playwright: *The Dance of Death* written in 1901. First of all, there are numerous leitmotifs which appear in both plays: The concept of death being the worst and longest sort of punishment, the pacifying, releasing power of the sea, the meaning of Fate, the idea of an everlasting family curse, the house of evil and death, all seem to be elements borrowed from *The Dance of Death.* Secondly, similarities may be found between the relationships of the main characters in both Strindberg's and O'Neill's plays.

The shattered love-hate relationship between Alice and her husband in *the Dance of Death* is almost identical to the one between Christine and Ezra Mannon; Alice's erotic attraction towards her cousin Kurt and their conspiracy against the Captain resembles Christine's love affair with Adam Brant; the Captain's attachment to his daughter Judith and his directing her against her mother recalls the affection between Ezra and Lavinia,

and finally Judith's desperate love for Allan strongly reminds one of Lavinia's relationship with Peter.

The most frequently occuring motif in Strindberg's play is the concept of death being not the end of life but the end of a tormenting punishment, which is life. Most of the characters of the play - Alice, Kurt, the Captain - spend their life in the hope of being released from their ordeal through death. But life seems to be too long and their agony ceaseless: 'All life is horrible! And you, who believe in a sequel, do you think there will be peace afterwards?' (p.105)[54], states the Captain exhausted by being constantly tortured, hoping to acquire peace through death. Similar is Alice's exclamation when she, too, seems to detect a rescuing quality in death: 'Now only death can part us. We know that and that is why we wait for him as our deliverer!' (p.107). 'Perhaps when death comes life begins' (p.159), the Captain says in a state of despair. Judith also appears to have connected death with bliss, as her words to Allan indicate: 'Oh, if I could only die now, this moment, while I'm so happy!' (p.201). The same idea is repeated later in Alice's utterance 'The wonderful peace of death!' (p.214) It is obvious that all these characters are not afraid of dying: on the contrary they are afraid of being forced to live. In an analogous way, in *Mourning Becomes Electra* Orin commits suicide in the hope of being transferred to a sphere of peace and happiness: *'Death is an Island of Peace'* (p.270), he exclaims hypnotized, bewitched at the thought of achieving at last the paradise he could not find in life. Likewise Kurt's comment in *The Dance of Death* about Life being too long and tormenting, 'Short like everything but life itself, that is terribly long' (p.270), is based on the same concept as Lavinia's decision to punish herself not by committing suicide or confessing but by living as long as possible: *'Living alone here with the dead is a worse act of justice than death or prison!'* (p.287) [...] *'I know they will see to it I live for a long time.'* (p.288)

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[54] All quotations are taken from August Strindberg, *Easter and Other Plays* (London: Cape, 1929)

As shown from the comparative analysis made above, death is regarded in both plays as the only way for humans to be saved from their ordeal. However, it is made clear that they can also escape through another secret channel: the sea. Even in the ancient mythologies sea was associated with Lethe, with man's desire to forget, to leave behind evil and unhappiness, to break free and start anew. This particular element occurs in both plays: 'I must tell you that I applied for the post here in order to find peace by the sea', (p.132) explains Kurt who after a long, unhappy wandering around the world wishes to find shelter in a serene place. For him a habitat in the vicinity of the sea embodies peacefulness and tranquillity; for Judith the sea itself is her only means to break free from her destiny: 'We'll go out together and we'll take the little cutter, the little white one - and we'll sail out to the sea;' (p.200) But for them, as well as for the characters in *Mourning Becomes Electra* the sea proves to be nothing but a chimaera. Kurt only finds evil where he was expecting to find peace, Judith only states her intention to escape but her dream never actually materializes. In a similar way, the characters in *Mourning Becomes Electra* are bound to their destiny, and escape via the sea proves to be as unrealizable a scheme as salvation on the *Blessed Isles*. The Mannon residence is actually situated by the sea but that does not prevent it from being a temple of death. An even more tragic effect is created with Adam Brant's murder, which in fact takes place in the sea, on his ship. Adam appeared to be obsessed about the sea, convinced that it could help him to escape his fate. But eventully even he has to give up the sea: *'Let's not talk of her anymore. [...] I'll give up the sea. I think it's done with me now, anyway! The sea hates a coward.'* (p.183) Even for him the only way out seems to be death.

The reason why all these characters in both plays do not succeed in reaching salvation is the fact that another strong factor hinders it, a power so undefeatable that it deactivates the sea's delivering function. It has already been suggested that Fate is an element widely used by both writers. All the main characters in Strindberg's play appear

to acknowledge the hidden, mysterious power behind their lives which moves the strings of their destinies. 'Can you understand a human destiny like mine - like ours?' (p.151), Alice asks Kurt and thereby admits the existence of a supernatural power she can neither comprehend nor control. However, her belief in that unknown authority is so absolute that she actually expresses her thankfulness to it when she is finally released from her ordeal. She calls this power 'God' and feels that His superiority is so utterly beyond her human nature that she does not even dare address Him herself but asks Kurt to help her by playing the role of a medium: 'You, Kurt, who believe in God, thank Him on my behalf! thank Him from freeing me from the tower, from the wolf, from the vampire!' (p.209) Undoubtedly, although she asks Kurt to thank God on her behalf, it becomes obvious that she believes in His existence and omnipotence.

Another interesting point is the fact that a parallel can be drawn between the concept of Fate-God and the motif of Death-Deliverer. Alice reaches her salvation through her husband's death which set her free. Hence, Fate can be considered as another version of Death: if Fate chooses to punish its victims, it prolongs their life and suffering, if it decides to release them, it employs death's delivering quality and saves them. Exactly the same element is to be observed in O'Neill's trilogy. It is the Mannon fate that haunts and tortures the Mannons while they are alive; it is their fate that forces them to choose Death as a way out of their misery, and it is Lavinia's fate that urges her to inflict the punishment of life on herself.

Another element which appears in both plays is the motif of the family curse which is being passed on from generation to generation. It is essentially the realization that life itself is a curse; every human being has to be punished for having been born. 'Yes, sometimes I think we belong to an accursed race' (p.110), declares Alice about her own life, realizing later that even her children are bound to suffer because of the same curse: 'And when they go out into the world they'll be lonely, as we are lonely, and evil as

we are!' (p.157) This element of the inherited curse is even more strongly emphasized in *Mourning Becomes Electra.* Orin is being led to suicide and Lavinia to self-punishment because of their ancestors' accursed legacy. Orin tries to trace the family curse back to its origin, in order to understand, control and escape it, only to arrive at the painful realization that he is trapped. Lavinia tries to despise it, to spurn its power, only to arrive at the realization that her only way out would be to become its slave and obey it, to live as long as it would be enough for the curse to be paid out.

The last motif the two plays appear to have in common is that of the house of evil and death. As the residence of Alice and the Captain in *The Dance of Death* used to be a prison, its walls are actually saturated with evil and pain, which accordingly penetrates the souls of its residents, something that Kurt notices at once:

> But tell me: what are you two doing in this house? What is happening here? There's a smell like poisonous wallpaper - one feels sick the moment one comes in! [...] There's a dead body under the floor: there is hatred, - one can hardly breathe.' (p.105)

The more he stays in the house, the more suffocated and affected by its malice he becomes: 'It's as if these prison walls had drunk in all the evil qualities of the criminals within them: one has only to breathe here to become infected!' (p.150) Similarly, in *Mourning Becomes Electra* Lavinia exclaims: *'You know there's no rest in this house which Grandfather built as a temple of Hate and Death!'* (p.275). It is interesting to note that both houses are actually set by the sea, something that at first sight seems contradictory. However, this particular fact makes the evil power of the house appear even more difficult to defeat, as even the purifying sea proves to be too weak.

Apart from the similarity between the leitmotifs used in the two plays, an analogy can also be observed between the relationships of the main characters. The Captain and

Alice in *The Dance of Death* seem to be an extremely unhappily married couple. They themselves are talking about the misery of their married life: 'It would be more natural to hide our misery, our twenty-five years of misery.' (p.85) Furthermore, one becomes aware of another element in their relationship, which makes it far worse than merely unhappy: hatred. 'To me he is a stranger' (p.106), utters Alice and reveals the ghastly details of her martyrdom:

> What am I to say? - That I have lived in this tower for a lifetime, imprisoned, guarded by a man I have always hated - whom I now hate so utterly that, the day he died, I should laugh aloud! (p.107)

Her situation appears to be identical to Christine Mannon's in O'Neill's play: she lives isolated in the Mannon residence she detests, guarded by Ezra, hating him more and more every day of her life. *'You would understand if you were the wife of a man you hated!'* (p.55), she tells Lavinia when the latter finds out about her mother's love affair with Adam Brant. Both, Alice and Christine, had to sacrifice something to become married to the men who destroyed their lives: Alice had to abandon her career as an actress, Christine her passionate, loving nature, as that would not be suitable for a Mannon wife. Both women once loved their husbands before these became their guards and tormentors: 'I saw him - I see him - now, just as he was when he was twenty! I must have loved that man!' (p.214), says Alice after her husband's death.

> *I loved him once - before I married him - incredible as that seems now! He was handsome in his lieutenant's uniform! He was silent and mysterious and romantic! But marriage soon turned his romance into - disgust!* (p.56)

This exclamation is Christine's outburst when she cannot suppress her feelings any longer.

Another link between the two female characters is the fact that they become erotically involved with their husbands' enemies. Alice has an affair with her cousin Kurt, whom her husband always hated and envied; Christine becomes Adam Brant's mistress, who was scheming to take revenge on his cousin Ezra by stealing his wife even before falling in love with her. Both women manage to secure their lovers' aid in their attempt to murder their husbands and both of them reveal the truth about their adultery to their husbands, which results in both the Captain and Ezra having a heart-attack. 'But I know how my lover is! He's quite well, though still a little shy!... You miserable creature! I never loved you!' (p.155), Alice shouts to the Captain in the hope that the shock will cause his death, as he had already had a heart-attack before.

> *Yes, I dared! And all my trips to New York weren't to visit Father but to be with Adam! He's gentle and tender, he's everything you've never been. He's what I've longed for all these years with you - a lover! I love him! So now you know the truth.* (p.103)

This is what Christine announces to Ezra, knowing that his weak heart can never withstand the shock.

Kurt and Adam Brant are two more characters who have some characteristics in common. They have both returned after long wanderings with only one purpose: to take their revenge on the man who destroyed them. Kurt wishes to make the man who separated him from his children suffer; Adam's intention is to avenge his mother's ordeal and death on Ezra Mannon. They both become attached to their enemies' wives and plan with them their murder.

The Captain and Ezra Mannon also have certain similarities to each other. First of all, they both appear dressed in uniforms, something that stresses their sternness and conservatism. Secondly, they both isolate their wives from the outside world, deprive

them of every social contact, because of their insane jealousy towards them. But the most striking similarity between them is their attachment to their daughters. 'And do you know what Judith is? His own image whom he has trained to attack me!' (p.125), Alice states about her husband's relationship to their daughter, a statement later confirmed by the Captain himself! 'No! I want to see Judith! My child!' (p.125) In *Mourning Becomes Electra* Ezra Mannon turns to Lavinia in order to obtain the love and affection he could not find in his relationship with his wife. Even more significant is the fact that both the Captain and Ezra ask for their daughters after having had a heart-attack because of the shocking news about their wives' affairs: 'Judith, avenge me!' (p.155), the Captain cries out, something that sounds very similar to Ezra's appeal to Lavinia: *'Help! Vinnie!'* (p.105)

But even Lavinia has her equivalent in Judith: they are both the beloved daughters of their fathers at first and enemies of their mothers, but they eventually become attached to their mothers denouncing their paternal heritage. In addition, Judith's love for the innocent Allan and her effort to escape and find happiness with him is almost identical to Lavinia's desperate unsuccessful attempt to break free with Peter's help and pure love. Judith describes her dream to Allan:

> We'll go out together, and we'll take the little cutter, the little white one - and we'll sail out to the sea; we'll make fast the sheet - there's a glorious breeze- and so we'll sail on till we go down - right out there, far away, where's there's no goosegrass and no jelly-fish! (p.200)

Her words call to mind Lavinia's vision as she talks about it to Peter: *'Oh, won't it be wonderful, Peter - once we're married and have a home with a garden and trees! We'll be so happy!'* (p.271)

The comparative analysis of the two plays made above proves their similarity and suggests Strindberg's influence on O'Neill.

Psycho-analytical Influence

When *Desire under the Elms* appeared in 1924 many critics commented on its being the literary expression of Freud's famous theory about the Oedipus-complex. However, O'Neill himself rejected this opinion as inaccurate. He considered himself as an 'intuitively keen analytical psychologist' and complained to many of his friends about his critics' doubting his ability to write about human nature without having been influenced by anybody in particular. He gave a complete statement of his acquaintance with psychoanalysis in a reply to Martha Carolyn Sparrow, who was preparing a thesis on the use of modern psychology, and especially of psychoanalysis, in his plays. The letter, dated 13.10.1929, reads in part:

> There is no conscious use of psychoanalytical material in any of my plays. All of them could have easily been written by a dramatist who had never heard of the Freudian theory and was simply guided by an intuitive psychological insight into human beings and their life - impulsions that are as old as Greek drama. It is true that I am enough of a student of modern psychology to be fairly familiar with the Freudian implications inherent in the actions of some of my characters while I was portraying them; but this was always an afterthought and never consciously was I for a moment influenced to shape my material along the lines of any psychological theory. It was my dramatic instinct and my own personal experience with human life that alone guided me. [...] I have only read two books of Freud's, *Totem and Taboo* and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. The book that interested me the most of all of those of the Freudian school is Jung's *Psychology of the Unconscious* which I read many years ago. If I have

> been influenced unconsciously it must have been by this book more than any other psychological work. But the 'unconscious' influence stuff strikes me always as extremely suspicious! It is so darned easy to prove! I would say that what has influenced my plays the most is my knowledge of the drama of all time - particularly Greek Tragedy - and not any books on psychology.[55]

About two years later, when *Mourning Becomes Electra* was published and produced, many critics found that the play was written under an obvious Freudian influence, something that Doris V. Falk detected in almost all the plays since *Desire under the Elms*: 'As before, in most of the plays since *Desire under the Elms* all other masks and values stem from the power of the father - and the mother - images, the Oedipus and Electra complexes.'[56] John Haynes Holmes also suggested:

> *Mourning Becomes Electra* is from beginning to end a Freudian document. It is the presentation, so to speak, of the Freudian philosophy as that final interpretation of life toward the discovery of which man has been moving through the ages.[57]

He went as far as to argue that it was reading Freud's work that helped O'Neill to create such realistic characters, like the ones in *Mourning Becomes Electra* (p.18) In reply O'Neill repeated his former statement:

> Taken from my author's angle, I find fault with the critics on exactly the same point - that they read too damn much Freud into stuff that could have been written exactly as it is before psychoanalysis was ever heard of... I

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[55] Törnqvist, *A Drama of Souls*, p.35.
[56] Doris V. Falk, *Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension* (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1958), p.129.
[57] Holmes, p.15.

> think I know enough about men and women to have written *Mourning Becomes Electra* almost exactly as it is if I had never heard of Freud and Jung or the others. Authors were psychologists, you know, and profound ones, before psychology was invented. And I am no deep student of psychoanalysis. As far as I can remember, of all the books written by Freud, Jung, etc., I have read only four and Jung is the only one of the lot who interests me. Some of his suggestions I find extraordinarily illuminating in the light of my own experience with hidden human motives.[58]

Although O'Neill was so particular about denying that he was influenced by the psycho-analytical theories, he was certainly involved with psychoanalysis, as it was one of the main interests of the radical intellects in Provincetown, and he had Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and *The Analysis of the Ego* in his library. He also had personal contact with at least two psychoanalysts. Between 1923 and 1925 he sporadically saw Dr. Smith Ely Jelliffe, a well-known New York psychiatrist, and although he was not psychoanalysed, he received counsel about a variety of problems. However, he actually underwent psychoanalysis in 1926 by Dr. Louis Bish and admitted afterwards that it helped him to realize that he both loved and hated his father and that he was suffering from an unresolved Oedipus-complex. Nevertheless, although there is sufficient evidence that O'Neill was not indifferent to psychoanalysis in relation to his personal life and affairs, there is no proof whatsoever that any of his plays had been written under a psycho-analytical influence. He made it quite clear himself that his intention was mostly to throw light on the psychological aspect of his characters to 'get modern psychological approximation of Greek sense of Fate'. He also tried to explain his characters' behaviour

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[58] The extract is taken from O'Neill's letter held in the Eugene O'Neill archives at Yale.

from a psychological point of view. In his working notes for *Mourning Becomes Electra* he gave a psychological reason for Christine's hatred towards her husband: 'sexual frustration by his puritan sense of guilt turning love to lust'. He also referred to the 'hidden psychic identity' between the women in the play and commented on the desire of the characters' to escape to the *Blessed Isles* as expressing the 'longing for the primitive, a yearning for pre-natal non-competitive freedom from fear'. These extracts certainly reveal O'Neill's interest in the study of human nature. However, they do not prove any Freudian influence.

It is also possible that both O'Neill and Freud had been influenced by the same source, something that would partly explain the similarity of their views. Freud's following comment indicates that Nietzsche's ideas - whose tremendous influence on O'Neill's work is undeniable - had later been embraced by modern depth psychology: 'Nietzsche's Ahnungen und Einsichten decken sich oft in der erstaunlichsten Weise mit den mühsamen Ergebnissen der Psychoanalyse'.[59]

Last but not least, the fact that O'Neill never used any psycho-analytical terminology may imply that he was attracted to the mystic and not to the scientific aspect of psychoanalysis; the human soul fascinated him, but he dealt with it as a dramatist and not a psychiatrist.

Despite the fact that O'Neill himself firmly denied having been influenced by the psycho-analytical theory which had appeared a few years previously, certain motifs in the trilogy can be interpreted only by employing means of psychology. First of all, the characters give psychological reasons for their feelings towards each other. Lavinia does her utmost to show her attachment to her father and her hatred towards her mother. Notwithstanding her obvious facial resemblance to Christine, she claims: *'What do looks amount to? I'm not a bit like her! Everybody knows I take after father!'* (p.42)

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[59] Törnqvist, *A Drama of Souls*, p.42.

Furthermore, she states her absolute commitment, her duty towards her father: *'I love Father better than anyone in the world. There is nothing I wouldn't do - to protect him from hurt!'* (p.44) Lavinia's attitude towards her parents can be described in psycho-analytical terms; it can be defined as an Electra-complex: the erotic attraction of a daughter to her father and her hatred and jealousy towards her mother because of her (the daughter's) inability to place herself in her mother's position. This is exactly the explanation Christine gives for Lavinia's behaviour:

> *I know you, Vinnie! I've watched you ever since you were little, trying to do exactly what you're doing now! You've tried to become the wife of your father and the mother of Orin! You've always schemed to steal my place!* (p.59)

However, the fact that O'Neill was a keen student of human nature is proved by the fact that this simple explanation does not satisfy him; he is not copying Freud's theories: he makes Lavinia give a more profound psychological reason for her feelings: Christine's hatred for her daughter, initiated by her disgust for her husband:

> *So, I was born of your disgust! I've always guessed that, Mother - ever since I was little - when I used to come to you - with love - but you would always push me away! I've felt it ever since I can remember -your disgust! [...] Oh, I hate you! It's only right I should hate you!* (p.56)

She turned to her father, not because of a natural inclination but because of her failure to obtain her mother's affection.

Similarly, Christine gives a psychological reason for her unnatural hatred towards her daughter:

I tried to love you. I told myself it wasn't human not to love my own child, born of my body. But I never could make myself feel you were born of any body but his! You were always my wedding night to me - and my honeymoon! (p.56)

Her disappointment over Ezra's incapability of giving her the kind of love she wanted, a passionate but all the same pure love, instead of his puritanistic lust, soon became disgust out of which Lavinia was born. However, because of Ezra's absence while Christine was carrying her second baby, Orin, Christine considered him as her baby only and devoted herself to him for being hers: *'And when Orin was born he seemed my child, only mine, and I loved him for that!'* (pp.56-57) She, therefore, gave to Orin the love she could not bring herself to give to her husband, and according to her it was Adam Brant's resemblance to Orin that initiated her attraction to him. However, Christine's devotion to Orin was also the cause of Ezra's feelings towards his children: he hated Orin for stealing away from him his wife's love and turned to Lavinia, as a substitute for Christine:

When I came back you had turned to your new baby, Orin. I was hardly alive for you any more. I saw that. I tried not to hate Orin. I turned to Vinnie, but a daughter's not a wife. (p.93)

Their parents' shattered relationship and their desire to hurt each other because of their inability to fulfil each other's dreams, transformed Orin and Lavinia into helpless marionettes in Christine's and Ezra's hands. Lavinia would do anything to protect her father, even if that would imply her having to destroy her mother, Orin is nothing but an automaton obeying Christine's orders and is totally bewitched by her: *'I only meant that no matter what you ever did, I love you better than anything in the world and-'* (p.146) Similarly to Lavinia, he goes as far as hating his father: *'All right then! I'll tell you the*

truth, Mother. I won't pretend to you I'm sorry he's dead!' (p.142), he exclaims not because of a genuine enmity he feels for his father, but because of Christine's reassurance that Ezra actually hated him:

> *I want to make up to you for all the injustice you suffered at your father's hands. It may seem a hard thing to say about the dead, but he was jealous of you. He hated you because he knew I loved you better than anything in the world!* (p.142)

Orin's Oedipus-complex is rooted in his disappointment, in his bitterness about Ezra's resenting him. This is the crucial point where O'Neill disengages himself from the psycho-analytical theory. It is undeniable that he does make use of certain psycho-analytical elements: the employment of the Electra and Oedipus-complex is the most striking example. But he only uses them in order to achieve his main purpose: to create a 'psychological fate'. It is a form of fate which forces Lavinia and Orin to be attracted to their parents: but it derives from inside them, it is purely psychological. O'Neill was not interested in definition and psychiatric cases. His aim was to create a drama based on the study of human nature, in order to show to his spectators the way to analyse and understand themselves, in order to understand his own psychological fate.

Biographical Influence

> I don't think any real dramatic stuff is created out of the top of your head. That is, the roots of a drama have to be in life, however fine and delicate and symbolic or fanciful the development. I have never written anything which did not come directly or indirectly from some event or impression of my own, but these things often develop very differently from what you expect.[60]

This statement by O'Neill clearly indicates that his plays were based on real incidents of his life. *Mourning Becomes Electra*, although not as strictly autobiographical as other plays by Eugene O'Neill (*A Moon for the Misbegotten, Long Day's Journey into Night*) is a play in which certain autobiographical elements are observable. Written at a time when Eugene O'Neill believed that he had achieved the peace of mind he was always dreaming of through his recent marriage to the famous actress Carlotta Monterey, *Mourning Becomes Electra* can be regarded as the first of the plays with which O'Neill was trying to placate his own ghosts. Arthur and Barbara Gelb note in their book:

> His basic conception of the main characters was at this point well established and clearly indicated that, despite its classical derivation, this play was to be yet another examination of the emotional fabric of the O'Neill family.[61]

The autobiographical elements of the play can be categorized into three main groups: first of all, characters of the play who resemble either O'Neill himself or actual people in his

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[60] Arthur and Barbara Gelb, 'As O'Neill saw the theatre', *New York Times Magazine*, 12 November 1961.
[61] Gelb, p.721.

life. Secondly, certain ideas which occur in the trilogy and on which O'Neill had based his own life. And finally, actual facts experienced by O'Neill.

Eugene O'Neill was born on 16 October 1888 in a New York hotel room as the second son of the famous actor James O'Neill and Ella Quinlan O'Neill. Although his parents do not appear as characters in *Mourning Becomes Electra* their relationship to each other and with their sons serves as a model for the creation of the relationship of Ezra and Christine Mannon to each other and with their children. Ella's marriage to James O'Neill proved to be nothing but a disillusion[62]. Although she never actually went as far as to hate or to murder him, as it is the case with Christine Mannon, she soon realized that the man she had fallen in love with could not offer her the lifestyle she was used to. His lower social status, which deprived Ella of the company of her former highclass friends and his miserliness soon transformed Ella's love into apathy which in turn drove her to morphine-addiction. Ezra Mannon realizes too late the mistakes he had made which resulted in Christine's disgust for him:

> *Then all the years we've been man and wife would rise up in my mind and I would try to look at them. But nothing was clear except that there'd always been some barrier between us - a wall hiding us from each oher! I would try to make up my mind exactly what that wall was but but I never could discover. [...] Do you know?* (p.93)

These words could also have been uttered by James O'Neill in respect of his marriage to Ella. In *Mourning Becomes Electra* the strict and puritanistic husband Ezra Mannon converts the love of his young vivacious and passionate wife into disgust and hatred. Like Ella, Christine regrets bitterly her having fallen in love with Ezra. Both women fell not

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[62] In their biographical study on O'Neill Arthur and Barbara Gelb also refer to the relationship of O'Neill's parents to each other, on which the following comparison is based.

for the actual men but for their image: Ella was infatuated by the man she saw on stage, Christine was attracted to Ezra's handsome appearance as a lieutenant. It is undeniable that O'Neill draws a parallel between the relationships of the two couples.

If the characters of Christine and Ezra Mannon bear certain similarities to Ella and James O'Neill, the character of Lavinia Mannon can be regarded as a depiction of Eugene O'Neill himself. They both lose their father, mother and only brother in the same order, they both feel the heavy family burden rested upon their shoulders: 'I have lost my Father, Mother and only brother within the past four years. Now I'm the only O'Neill of our branch left.'[63], O'Neill mourned in a letter to his former Gaylord farm nurse, Mary Clark in 1924, echoing Lavinia's words: *'I'm the last Mannon'*, feeling as bound to his own ghosts as she declared to be to the Mannon dead. But the most stunning similarity between O'Neill and the heroine of his trilogy can be traced in the last scene where, as if in possession of an uncanny insight and foresight, O'Neill makes Lavinia announce: *'I'll never go out to see anyone! I'll have the shutters nailed close so no sunlight can ever get in!'* (p.287), predicting his own fate in the last years of his life.

However, the character of Orin Mannon has inherited some elements of the personality of his creator as well. First of all, they share the same suicidal mania. O'Neill had once attempted unsuccessfully to bring his life to an end and had since been tormented by suicidal thoughts. Orin succeeds in killing himself, convinced that this would be his only means of salvation, of purification: *'Yes! It's the way to peace - to find her again - my lost island - Death is an Island of Peace, too, Mother will be waiting for me there-'* (p.276), screams Orin as if in a trance before committing suicide. His own love for his mother and his hostility towards his father have also been transplanted by O'Neill in the personality of the character of Orin Mannon. O'Neill grew up hating, despising and doing everything in his power to hurt his father who was trying to direct his and his

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[63] Gelb, p.533.

brother Jamie's life, and loving tenderly his fragile, unhappy mother. Precisely these are Orin's feelings towards his parents: hatred and contempt for his father who was trying to make a man out of him, and passionate, unhealthy affection for his mother. Like O'Neill, who only after James's death realized that behind his father's domineering power was hidden his concern for his sons, Orin feels that he could have understood his father if he had tried, but only after he is dead.

Yet the most characteristic element O'Neill has in common with his character is his attempt to break free from the curse of his family by writing their history. All the plays O'Neill has written bear autobiographical elements. O'Neill's hope in doing so was to placate his dead who were haunting him throughout his life. His dedication to his wife Carlotta in the first page of the script of *Long Day's Journey into Night* indicates his intention:

> For Carlotta, on our 12th Wedding Anniversary.
>
> Dearest: I give you the original script of this play of old sorrow, written in tears and blood. A sadly inappropriate gift, it would seem, for a day celebrating happiness. But you will understand. I mean it is a tribute to your love and tenderness which gave me the faith in love that enabled me to face my dead at last and write this play - write it with deep pity and understanding and forgiveness for all the four haunted Tyrones.
>
> These twelve years, Beloved One, have been a Journey into Light - into love. You know my gratitude. And my love!
>
> Gene.
>
> Tao House, July, 22, 1941.[64]

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64 The original script of *Long Day's Jorney into the Night* with O'Neill's handwritten dedication is held in the Eugene O'Neill archives at Yale.

Similarly, Orin Mannon shuts himself in his father's study and writes down the history of all the family crimes, seeking forgiveness and deliverance, trying to understand the past in order to predict the future:

> *I've tried to trace to its secret hiding-place in the Mannon past the evil destiny behind our lives! I thought if I could see it clearly in the past I might be able to foretell what fate has in store for us, Vinnie - but I haven't dared predict that - not yet - although I can guess* - (p.248)

Another interesting point is the fact that although both Lavinia and Orin can be considered as O'Neill's reflexions their relationship between each other strongly resembles O'Neill's attachment to his third wife, Carlotta Monterey. Orin grows dependent on Lavinia, in the same way that O'Neill was absolutely relying upon Carlotta. Lavinia is for Orin not only his sister, the only relative left to him, but she gradually becomes his mother, his partner, a beautiful stranger he desires:

> *You don't seem to feel all you mean to me now - all you have made yourself mean - since we murdered Mother! [...] I love you know with all the guilt in me - that guilt we share! Perhaps I love you too much, Vinnie!* (pp. 267-68)

This attachment of Orin recalls Carlotta's function in O'Neill's life, as indicated by his following letter to her:

> Mistress, I desire you, you are my passion, and my life-drunkenness, and my ecstasy, and the wine of joy to me! Wife, you are my love and my happiness, and the word behind my word, and the half of my heart! Mother, you are my lost way refound, my end and my beginning, the hand

> I reach out for in my lonely night, from the ghost-hunted inner dark, and on your soft breasts there is a peace for me that is beyond death!...[65]

Hard though he tried in the last years of his life to break free from her influence, O'Neill realized that the bond between them was something stronger and deeper than erotic passion, and that only death could separate them. He needed no one but Carlotta and she knew it. Nevertheless, Carlotta's influence on O'Neill had been misinterpreted by his friends, who not knowing her importance in O'Neill's life, were thinking of her as an egocentric creature trying to isolate him, in the same way that Hazel in *Mourning Becomes Electra* thinks that Lavinia keeps Orin imprisoned: *'He's getting worse. Keeping him shut up here is the worst thing Vinnie could do.'* (p. 257) Both O'Neill and Orin end their lives in the presence of the women they love.

There are certain ideas and beliefs which O'Neill from a very early age developed into a dogma, which he followed both in his personal life and as a playwright as well. One of the first concepts of O'Neill's was his faith in the delivering power of the sea. At first, while very young, he vaguely expressed his intention 'to go to sea'.But only after he did set sail, at the age of eighteen, did he realize that his passion for the sea had an almost religious quality. Arthur and Barbara Gelb refer to O'Neill's obsession about the sea:

> Shipping out was an escape from the circumstances that were suffocating him, into an atmosphere he sensed would set him free. The moment he felt the deck roll under his feet he realized he was, at last, in his natural element. For the first time in his life he felt he belonged. The sea gave him a sense of religious ecstasy, which he tried for the next thirty years to put into words.[66]

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[65] The correspondence between Eugene and Carlotta Monterey O'Neill is held at Yale.
[66] Gelb, p.144.

According to them, it was on his first voyage on the ship 'Charles Racine' that O'Neill conceived the idea of the liberating power of the sea:

> The Charles Racine was, to him, in what was the most flattering description sailors had for a ship 'a home'. And the sea began to symbolize for him both a source of life and a final, ecstatic freedom from the burden of life. Many years later he dreamed of incorporating this poetic concept into an autobiographical play to be called *Sea-Mother's Son.* For it was only in the vast womb of the sea that O'Neill felt serene. (p.146)

Although O'Neill did not sail for very long, mostly because of health problems, he had always treasured his memories of his years as a sailor and he was often referring to the unique bliss he found in living by the sea. In most of his plays O'Neill has transplanted his own affection for the sea and the ships into his characters. Adam Brant in *Mourning Becomes Electra* is characterized by a strong passion for the sea and the ships, as Lavinia senses: *'"Tall white clippers" you called them. You said they were like beautiful, pale women to you. You said you loved them more than you'd ever loved a woman!'* (p.43) However, Adam feels that he has betrayed the sea by having been a coward, by having followed Christine's plan to poison Ezra. His despair, caused by his strong belief that the sea would despise him, is evident in his following words: *'Let's not talk of her anymore. [...] I'll give up the sea. I think it's done with me now, anyway! The sea hates a coward.'* (p.183) It is worth mentioning that O'Neill uses the motif of the sea as a means to create one of the most tragic scenes of the play: Adam Brant's murder. Orin, blinded by his mad jealousy, kills Adam on his beloved ship, on the sea. In this scene O'Neill puts into words something he had witnessed happening in his own life. It is the battle between two forces: the evil fate directing a man's life, trying to destroy him, and the sea-saviour. In all his plays, as well as in his real life, the fate always proved to be stronger and invincible.

Similar to the delivering power of the sea was for O'Neill the strength he believed that was possessed by the deified Woman. O'Neill loved deeply all the women in his life: his mother, the numerous prostitutes he had met, his girlfriends, his wives and mostly his third wife, Carlotta. His worshipping the woman is made obvious in *Mourning Becomes Electra* by the fact that all three women of the play are the object of passionate affection by all the men. But in the end even they are unable to help the male characters to save themselves. Their mutual fate proves to be stronger and destructive.

Apart from these basic ideas, certain phrases of the play seem to be referring directly to incidents in Eugene O'Neill's life. The play opens with Seth, the old housekeeper of the Mannons, singing the sea-shanty *Shenandoah*, a shanty O'Neill was remembering from his days as a sailor, as Arthur and Barbara Gelb note. (p.150) *Shenandoah* appears as a leitmotif in the trilogy indicating the desire of all the haunted Mannons to be liberated from their destiny and escape to a land of Peace and Happiness. This 'Land of Peace and Happiness' was another of O'Neill's personal dreams. In order to find it he travelled all around the world, first by himself and later with Carlotta and changed various houses. Ezra Mannon's suggestion to Christine could be seen as a direct reference to O'Neill's voyage with Carlotta to China: *'I've a notion if we'd leave the children and go off on a voyage together - to the other side of the world- find some island where we could be alone a while.'* (p.95) Also, Lavinia's following words about Adam Brant could have been uttered about O'Neill: *'He's sailed all over the world - he lived on a South Sea island once, so he says.'* (p. 310) As a matter of fact, O'Neill believed at one point that he had acquired his desired peace of mind and privacy in one of the houses he and Carlotta lived in and to which he himself was referring to as his *Blessed Isles*:

> It was Ilka Chase who had recommended Sea Island as a new home for the O'Neills. In the copy of *Mourning Becomes Electra* that O'Neill presented

to Miss Chase not long after he moved to Georgia, he wrote: 'To Ilka, who found our Blessed Isles for us'.[67]

But his joy did not last long. He soon realized that even the new house was nothing but another 'Lost Island': 'Little by little the snug, lovefilled new home became a prison haunted, like Lavinia Mannon's mansion, by ghosts of the past'.[68] Like all his haunted Mannons O'Neill died chasing his chimera.

This vision of the Island of Happiness and Freedom was something O'Neill desperately needed in order to escape from a tragic reality which seemed to be haunting the O'Neill family: Alcoholism. Although James O'Neill had always been a heavy drinker he never became as addicted to alcohol as his sons did. Alcoholism was the cause of O'Neill's only brother Jamie's death. O'Neill wrote to his former nurse Mary Clark in 1924:

> My family were wiped out within three years... There were only the four of us. Booze got [Jamie] in the end. It was a shame. He and I were terribly close to each other... he had never found his place. He had never belonged.[69]

It seems that he used his brother's instance as a model for the creation of the character of David Mannon, Adam's father:

> *He'd taken to drink. He was a coward - like all Mannons - once he felt the world looked down on him. He sulked and avoided people. He sank down and down and my mother worked and supported him. I can remember*

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[67] Gelb, p.759.
[68] Gelb, p.889.
[69] As quoted in Gelb, p.533.

> *when men from the corner saloon would drag him home and he'd fall in the door, a sodden carcass.* (p.47)

Adam's words about his father describe a situation O'Neill had only too often experienced.

Another incident of O'Neill's life that has been used as a motif in *Mourning Becomes Electra* is his mother's sudden metamorphosis after her husband's death. Ella, who had always lived in her husband's shadow, found her freedom after his death. But even her physical appearance improved considerably. Dressed in black she looked much prettier than before: mourning became her. Arthur and Barbara Gelb suggest that there was a link between Ella's transformation and the title O'Neill gave to his trilogy:

> Ella seemed actually to bloom as a widow. Mourning became her spiritually, as well as physically. (Many years later the image of his mother as a widow came back to O'Neill. By the title *Mourning Becomes Electra*, he wrote soon after completing the trilogy in 1931, 'I sought to convey that mourning befits Electra; it becomes Electra to mourn; it is her fate; black is becoming to her and it is the color that becomes her destiny.' (p.433)

In addition, the image of his metamorphosed mother also served as a model for the two basic female characters of his play: Christine and Lavinia. First, Christine seems to have changed noticeably after Ezra's death: *'But you're different! What's happened to you?'* (p.128), asks Orin the first moment he sets eyes on her and tries to define his mother's 'being different': *'No. You're more beautiful than ever! You're younger too, somehow!'* (p.136) Christine seems revitalized by her husband's death, an effect her own death has on her daughter Lavinia: *'Then Lavinia enters, coming up the drive from left, front, and*

stands regarding the house. One is at once aware of an extarordinary change in her.' (p.222) She seems to have inherited all her mother's characteristics, something that was also to be noticed in Ella O'Neill's case:

> In sharp contrast to her demeanor of earlier years, Ella was animated. She laughed a great deal, mostly at Jamie's antics; she spoke with pleasure about the theatre and with affection of the actors who had been James's contemporaries. [...] She seemed, in some respect to have taken on James's gregarious personality. [70]

It becomes evident, that although *Mourning Becomes Electra* cannot be considered as an autobiographical play, O'Neill's experiences of his shattered life are the cornerstone of the trilogy.

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[70] Gelb, p.434.

CHAPTER FOUR:

THE CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF GERHART HAUPTMANN'S *ELEKTRA*

Greek Influence

From very early on in his literary career Hauptmann made generous use of ancient Greek mythological elements and motifs. His early poems, although basically inspired by his immediate roots and surroundings, clearly indicate his strong inclination towards Greece and Greek spirit. His poem 'Col di Rodi', written in 1904, is one of the most characteristic instances of the strong influence of Greek mythological motifs.

> Wie Pallas' Goldhelm oben blitzt ein Schein.
> Wie Eumenidendonner murrt's im Grunde.
> [...]
> Allein wer hindert mich, daß ich mein Haupt
> zur Erde neige und Poseidon grüße?
> Daß ich in Ehrfurcht, wenn auch, marktbestaubt,
> im Stahl des Helios die Augen schließe?
> Zeus Hypatos, daß ich, anrufend, dir
> den Hauch, den du mir schenktest, wieder schenke?
> Wer, Aphrodite, daß ich dein gedenke
> und deines ewigen Götterstrahls in mir?[1]

From the way he refers to the Greek gods in this poem we can deduce that he not only felt a strong attraction towards their world but that he also saw himself as an individual

[1] Gerhart Hauptmann, *Ausblicke* (Berlin: Fischer, 1924), p.170.

longing to experience it, as he himself states a few years later in his memoirs of his trip to Greece (1907): 'Ich erwäge plötzlich mit einem gelinden Entsetzen, daß ich mich nur doch noch auf einer Reise nach jenem Lande befinde, in das es mich schon achtzehn Jahren hyperionsehnsüchtig zog'.[2] (p.15)

[...] 'Ich sage mir, dieses köstliche fremde Land wird nun auf Wochen hinaus - und Wochen bedeuten auf Reisen viel - für mich eine Heimat sein'. (p.44)

However, long before he undertook his trip to Greece, which strongly influenced if not completely changed his literary production thereafter, his image of Greece went through a transformation. Despite his awareness of the importance of the twelve Olympian gods for the classical era of Greek history and dramaturgy (fifth century B.C.) he focused his attention on the period before that, the prehistoric, archaic Greece with its primitive cults and mystic ceremonies. Zeus and the twelve gods faded away as his attention was drawn almost solely to Demeter and other chthonian deities connected with Dionysus, the symbol of the eternal conflict between life and death. In his book *Gerhart Hauptmann und die Antike* Felix A. Voigt emphasizes Hauptmann's turn towards prehistoric Greece: 'Vor allem aber tritt schon jetzt, noch vor dem Betreten hellenischer Erde, Hauptmann ein Gott der Griechen nahe, der neben Demeter der erdhafteste ist, Dionysos' [3]. In antithesis to Goethe, who used as the basis for his *Greek plays* the serene and radiant world of the classical Greek tradition, Hauptmann preferred to depict in his plays and poems the dark side of Greece. Ruled by Black Zeus, the chthonian equivalent of the Olympian Zeus, Greece is described as a place of tenebrous forces constantly emerging to the surface, a place characterized by the worship of Mother-Earth (Demeter), Death (Black Zeus/Persephone) and Resurrection (Dionysus).

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[2] All quotations are taken from Gerhart Hauptmann, 'Griechischer Frühling', in *Sämtliche Werke*, 7, (Berlin: Propyläen, 1962), p.15.

[3] Felix A. Voigt, *Hauptmann und die Antike* (Berlin: Schmidt, 1965), p.42.

The use of the motif of chthonian deities is so frequent in Hauptmann's work that it has been the object of a number of studies. As Dietrich Meinert observes in his book *Hellenismus und Christentum in Gerhart Hauptmanns Atriden-Tetralogie*:

> Gregor bezeichnet Hauptmann einmal im Gegensatz zu Goethe, dem *Olympier*, als den Priester des *niederen Zeus* und spielt dadurch auf Hauptmanns Auffassung von Griechentum an, das sich ihn nicht wie Goethe in seiner apollinischer Klarheit darbietet, sondern als eine Verbindung von Dunkel und Licht, als eine Verkörperung der ewig zeugenden Urmacht, die sowohl von Göttern als von Dämonen beherrscht ist.[4]

This combination of light and darkness revealed itself more clearly to Hauptmann during his journey through Greece. From the very beginning he felt himself captivated by the mysterious atmosphere of the country: 'Es ist etwas fronmäßig Lasttragendes in diesem Überfluß, so daß hier wiederum das Mysterium der Fruchtbarkeit beinahe zu Gestalten verdichtet, dem inneren Sinne sich aufdrängt.' (p.34) Furthermore, he is rather particular in stressing throughout the whole book that the main purpose of his trip was not to become familiar with the spirit of classical Greece, but to follow his impulse which was leading him directly towards archaic Hellas: 'Wie so ganz nah und natürlich berührt nun auf einmal das Griechentum, das durchaus nicht nur im Sinne Homers oder gar im Sinne der Tragiker zu begreifen ist.' (p.40) The highly religious character of the country made itself apparent to the writer who associated every single detail of Greece with a deity:

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[4] Dietrich Meinert, *Hellenismus und Christentum in Gerhart Hauptmanns Atriden-Tetralogie* (Cape Town: Balkema, 1964), pp.3-4.

> Hier aber haben sich Götter und Halbgötter mit jedem weißen Berggipfel, jedem Tal und Tälchen, jedem Baum und Bäumchen, jedem Fluß und Quell vermählt, alles geheiligt. Und so vollkommen war diese Heiligung, daß der Spätgeborene, um Jahrtausende Verspätete, daß der Barbar noch heut - und sogar in einem Bahncoupé - von ihr im tiefsten Wesen durchdrungen wird. (p.57)

Of all the various deities surrounding him he considered Mother-Earth as of major importance and defined her as the personification of the country itself: 'Denn dies ist den griechischen Göttern eigen, daß sie mit innigen Banden des Gemüts weniger an den Olymp als an die griechische Muttererde gebunden sind'. (p.57). Being a playwright, Hauptmann could not fail to see the strong connection between the world of the Greek gods and the ancient Greek theatre. For the first time theatre was revealed to him as a temple with a sacred character, and this made him express his disappointment that modern churches were so remote from modern theatre and made him yearn for the time when they used to be a unity:

> Kurz, was heut in Theater und Kirche zerfallen ist, war damals ganz und eins; und weit entfernt, ein Memento mori zu sein, lockte der Tempel ins höhere festliche Leben, er lockte dazu wie ein buntes, göttliches Gauklerzelt. Während unsere Kirchen eigentlich nur den Unterirdischen geweiht zu sein scheinen, galten die griechischen Tempel als Wohnung der Himmlischen. (p.50)

His memoirs of his trip into the world of archaic Greece can be regarded as one of the main factors which was to influence his writing in the last years of his life the

tetralogy based on the myth of the House of the Atrides, as Dietrich Meinert suggests.[5] Hauptmann's tetralogy is indeed set in an archaic and obscure Greece, one which predates the settings of the Greek tragedies on the same myth. The dominant forces in Hauptmann's *Atriden-Tetralogie* are the chthonian deities he himself considered as representative of the image of Greece he had created in his mind, and which bears no similarity whatsoever to the picture given by both the Greek dramatists and other German writers: 'Ungleich den Dramen der griechischen Dramatiker oder Goethes und Hofmannsthals die den Atridenstoff behandelten wird bei Hauptmann die Handlung vom Anfang an von Hekate der "Todesmutter" bestimmt.'[6]

The first evidence of Hauptmann having been influenced by his Greek experience is his play *Der Bogen des Odysseus*. As Rolf Michaelis points out in his book *Der Schwarze Zeus* about Hauptmann's relation to Greece: 'Mit dem *Bogen des Odysseus* gewinnt aber auch das Erlebnis der Griechenlandreise von 1907 im dramatischen Werk zum ersten Mal Gestalt.'[7] However, nothing written by Hauptmann is so clearly the absolute depiction of his concept of Greece, which had been fermenting in his mind for nearly forty years, as the *Atriden-Tetralogie*. Nothing expresses the dramatic atmosphere of the tetralogy better than Hauptmann's own words summarizing his view of Greek tragedy at the end of his travel through Greece:

> Wenn wir einen Durchbruch des apollinischen Glanzes in die Bereiche des Hades als möglich erachteten, so möchte ich die Tragödie, cum grano salis, mit einem Durchbruch der unterirdischen Mächte oder mit einem Vorstoß dieser Mächte ins Licht vergleichen. (p.101)

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[5] Meinert, p.7.
[6] Meinert, p.7.
[7] Rolf Michaelis, *Der Schwarze Zeus* (Berlin: Argon, 1962), p.17.

Gerhart Hauptmann's one-act play *Elektra*, the third part of his *Atriden-Tetralogie*, is closer to the three ancient plays on the Electra-myth than the two other modern plays on the same theme already discussed. In Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Elektra* there is no direct evidence of the incidents of the play taking place in ancient Greece. The only indication is the use of ancient names for the characters. There is no further suggestion that the plot is set in a Greek town some years after the Trojan War. Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* is even remoter from the Greek plays in that respect, as the place and time are given as a small New England town at the end of the American Civil War. Even the names, although deriving from the Greek ones, have been anglicized.

In Hauptmann's play on the contrary, place and time correspond to the Greek mythological tradition, as known from the Greek tragedies. The third part of the tetralogy takes place in the temple of the goddess Demeter. However, this is not the only geographical reference. Pylades refers to Corinth and Delphi while describing his and Orest's trip through Greece before arriving in Mykene. These exact details of the Atrides-myth not only indicate Hauptmann's familiarity with Greek mythology, they may also show that he knew the country at first hand. Perhaps the trip taken by the two heroes of the play is nothing but a nostalgic recollection of the writer's own adventure in Greece. As the tetralogy was written in the dark years of the Second World War it could be regarded as an attempt to escape into the safe haven of his Greek memories. Nevertheless, he does not escape into a world full of light but, quite the opposite, into a world of shadows and obscurity. It has already been suggested that Hauptmann never experienced Greece as a luminous country. Despite the few lucid instances in the *Griechischer Frühling* it becomes obvious that Greece was to him the kingdom of dark forces; his insistence on the importance of chthonian deities proves this point. Hence, it is understandable why the play takes place in a gloomy, mysterious atmosphere. The temple where all the characters are doomed to gather for the materialization of their revenge is

not just any place of worship. It is dedicated to the worship of the Earth goddess Demeter, her daughter Persephone and her partner Pluto, the ruler of the kingdom of the dead. Hauptmann certainly regarded these three deities as of major importance. As Felix A. Voigt points out: 'Seit seiner griechischen Reise stand ihm ja die Demeter-Gestalt immer besonders nahe und auch auf seinen Reisen begleitete ihn das alte Buch Richard Försters über Persephone-Kore.'[8] It is also characteristic of Hauptmann's concept of Greece that the statues decorating the spooky sanctuary have nothing in common with the magnificent classical statues Greece is associated with: all three statues are primitive wooden images, intensifying the occult character of the place. This setting is so different from the backgrounds of all the other plays on the same myth, that Voigt rightly considers it as Hauptmann's own invention which he sees as connected with his particular bond with chthonian deities:

> Schon hier erfindet Hauptmann etwas Neues. An einem Demetertempel wird in dieser Urzeit und in der Atmosphäre eines archaischen Königshofs kaum zu denken sein. Diese Göttin gehört nicht zu dem Kreise der 'homerischen' Götter, ihr Kult ist volkstümlich-mystischer Natur und an Eleusis gebunden. Aber Hauptmann liebt diese Erdmutter und verleiht so seinen Dichtungen einen besonderen Zug der Erdhaftigkeit und Urtümlichkeit.[9]

He goes on to explain that Demeter was not simply Hauptmann's *favourite* deity, but rather his medium to enter what he thought of as *real Greece*, which he discovered in his early years and revealed in his later works: 'Denn er stößt ja in eine andere geistige Umgebung vor, als es eben die der homerischen Gesellschaft ist, in das religiöse

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[8] Voigt, p.133.
[9] Voigt, p.142.

Empfinden der Urzeit, so daß ganz bewußt [...] sein späteres Griechentum in Wirklichkeit ein älteres ist.'[10] In his description of the scenery of the play Hauptmann refers to one of his favourite motifs: the blood-steaming bath, another version of the image of the chthonian fountain. The fact that Agamemnon met his death in a bath is not a coincidence. According to Hauptmann, such fountains can be regarded as the passage between the world of the living and the world of the dead. It is the door through which chthonian forces emerge to the surface, though through it daylight also penetrates the eternal darkness. It is the only way for Persephone to leave her shadowy kingdom and become reunited with her Earth-Mother before returning to her partner. Life follows death and vice versa. This very bath which had been Agamemnon's death-trap gave refuge and life to his daughter Elektra in a macabre way; she became the priestess of the temple, dedicated her life to the dream of revenge, and came out into the light only to drag her mother back to the place from where her father's shed blood had sent her, and this is through the bath, the same entrance Agamemnon had used. Dietrich Meinert also stresses this point:

> Nach Iphigenies Eingang in die Unterwelt folgt für die Atriden eine Zeit des tiefsten Dunkels und Grauens. Der Schauplatz der beiden Einakter ist der Tempel der dreieinigen Götter, Pluto, Persephone und Demeter. Hier ist der Ort, an dem durch die Quelle Hades und Oberwelt verbunden werden. Der Atem der Verdamnis vergiftet die ganze Menschheit.[11]

Rolf Michaelis in his study *Der Schwarze Zeus* also refers to the motif of the chthonian fountain not only in relation to *Elektra* and the *Atriden-Tetralogie* but more generally in Hauptmann's world view.[12]

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[10] Voigt, p.142.
[11] Meinert, p.53.
[12] Michaelis, p.21.

The deathly quality of the place is accentuated by the fact that the first words uttered by Orest, who arrives there with his friend Pylades, show his utter repugnance towards the temple which recalls to his mind images of Hades. Coming from the outside world, Orest immediately notices that he has entered another sphere. What he is not aware of as yet, is that he was driven there by Fate. The first character to appear from inside the temple confirms Orest's fear that he is in the Underworld: *'Elektra tritt hinter einem Götterbilde hervor, bleich und gegen früher unkenntlich'* (p.151).[13]

A pale creature resembling a mask of death rather than a human being, unrecognizable and unable to recognize at first her own brother, Elektra has been hidden behind one of the primitive images of death, as if seeking protection. With her first words she tries to warn the two strangers against the place they have arrived at: *'Ihr Unglückseligen, was sucht ihr hier?/ Kehrt um; hier ist der Tod! Kehrt um ins Leben!'* (p.155)

From this first appearance Elektra as a character can be regarded as a different version of the motif of the chthonian fountain mentioned above. By no means belonging to the world of the living, but also not dead, she resembles a phantom, wandering between two worlds, warning Orest and Pylades to go away and simultaneously attracting them. She is half-way between life and death, the human equivalent of Persephone, but presented in a more macabre manner. Persephone left Pluto and the kingdom of the dead to be united with her mother, the Earth herself, only to return to the Underworld six months later. Elektra is sent by the haunting spirit of her dead father not only to be united with her mother - who incidently is worshipped by her son Orest as the Eternal-Mother goddess, as will be discussed further on - but to return to her father's grave with her. The

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[13] All quotations are taken from Gerhart Hauptmann, *Die Atriden-Tetralogie*, ed. by Hubert Razinger (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1956).

reunion of Persephone and Demeter is one of love, Elektra's and Klytämnestra's one of revenging hatred.

The first dialogue between Elektra and Pylades shows that the two friends have come to the border between life and death and the woman they have encountered is the priestess guarding the gate:

PYLADES:

Erst laß uns wissen, Schatten, wer du bist!
Nie standen wir am Rand des Tartarus
bisher und redeten noch nie mit Toten.
Uns stockt der Herzschlag: um uns rauscht die Styx, des Höllenhundes
Knurren macht uns zittern.
ELEKTRA:
Du sprichst die Wahrheit, ja, auch mich, auch mich! Kommt mir nicht nah,
faßt mich nicht an! Ich bin
von Abgrundwassern stinkend überspült:
es bringt dem oberen Geschlecht den Tod. (p.156)

Elektra's apparent abhorrence of the temple indicates that although she lives there and serves as its priestess she is aware of its destructive power and of her own detestable appearance. She tries to protect the two strangers from both the place and herself.

Hauptmann sets his play in a preclassical Greece where definite hints of primitive matriarchy are to be traced, although patriarchy has already made its appearance. The first indication is the importance attached to Demeter, the symbol of the Eternal-Mother as well as the Mother-Earth. Her love and deep grief for the loss of her daughter Persephone has established Demeter as the deity in whose face the Mother and Matriarchy are worshipped. But the conflict between matriarchy and patriarchy is

particularly underlined in Orest's confused personality. In spite of his yearning for his mother's love all these years since his early childhood when he was expelled from the palace, he is forced to defend his father's memory and avenge his shameful murder on his cruel assassin, his mother. Even before realizing that he has arrived at the place where he is destined to fulfil the act of revenge, he expresses his tantalizing dilemma:

O Mutter,
wie gerne schmiegt' ich mich an deine Brust
in nie gestillter Kindesliebe Durst!
Doch eine grause Krankheit gärt in mir,
die erzner Wille in mich eingepflanzt,
untrennbar von den Pulsen meines Bluts;
sie fiebert immer nur das eine Wort
in grausen Fieberscheuern: Rache! Rache! (p.153)

Throughout the play he wavers between his love for his mother and his duty towards his father. He is prepared to forget and forgive everything to regain his mother's affection, he spurns the patriarchal society which forces him to commit a crime against his will and wishes to return to a time of purity and innocence with his mother, the Eternal Mother, as the only object of worship: *'Laßt uns versuchen, einmal klar zu sehen/ mit Kinderaugen, die uns dienten, als/ wir rein und schuldlos in der Welt gewandelt./ So, arme Mutter, gib mir deine Hand!'* (p.169). Even after Klytämnestra's cold and ruthless refusal to accept him as her son and be reunited with him, he tries over and over again to soften her heart with his filial affection: *'Doch meine Mutter bist du,/ die ich all meine Zeit so tief entbehrt./ Vergib, was ich an Irrtum sagen mag/ in meiner Fremdheit: hungrig ist mein Herz,/ doch ungeschickt in Kindeszärtlichkeit./ Befiehl mir, deinem Knaben, doch in*

Liebe!' (pp.169-70). Later, when Klytämnestra claims to have no son he attempts for the last time to approach her:

> *Nein, nicht so, Mutter! Laß der Kinder Seele*
> *nicht dieses Wolfsgebelle Antwort geben,*
> *kein Raubtier springe zwischen dich und mich!*
> *Ich tappe wie ein Säugling nach der Brust,*
> *ich bettle flennend nach dem Mutterherzen,*
> *das, goldner Glocke Ton, darunter pocht.* (p.170)

Even when in the end he has to kill her, he does it in self-defence, reacting spontaneously as a human being under attack rather than as an avenger punishing his father's murderer.

Klytämnestra's stubborn refusal to accept her son's love may derive from her own belief in her superiority as the Eternal Mother. By acknowledging Orest's feelings for her she would admit that she had committed a crime in the past. It would imply her regretting having killed her husband, having sent her son to exile, having forced Elektra to become a ghost of her old self. And Klytämnestra cannot bring herself to admit that she could have erred. The only Power she acknowledges as being above her is Fate, personified by the three goddesses, Moirai, in whose service both Klytämnestra and Elektra have placed themselves. The motif of Fate is another important element in Hauptmann's plays. His belief, as can be detected from his plays, was that Fate absolutely directs and controls the life of every human being. Even the twelve gods, even the powerful chthonian deities with their ability to wander between two different worlds, are inferior to the one and only ultimate power: Fate. Meinert goes as far as to suggest that for Hauptmann Fate is another form of the Christian God:

> Auch bei ihm sprechen die Moiren das letzte Wort, aber ohne vorher dem Menschen die Möglichkeit der Wahl gegeben zu haben. Sie bestimmen das Schicksal und legen es unabänderlich fest. Weder den Göttern noch den Menschen bleibt die Möglichkeit, den einmal bestimmten Schicksalsweg zu verlassen. Der Begriff der Moira schließt bei ihm den des christlichen Gottes ein.[14]

He regards the twelve gods as the messengers between humans and God.[15] Even in the one-act play *Elektra* the presence of the Moirai is dominant. The two female characters constantly refer to themselves as their servants. Elektra is the first character to mention Fate as the factor which has transformed what used to be Demeter's holy temple into hell.

Without challenging them or doubting their superiority she considers them to be responsible for everything around her, for her condition and furthermore for her desire for revenge: *'Des Rächers Händen/ es zu bewahren, haben mich die Moiren/ bestimmt* (p.170), she says about the axe she has been keeping all these years for the act of revenge. This is why she cannot share her brother's affectionate feelings towards their mother; she is obeying Fate's commands; the only power that rules her existence. The bitter hatred between Elektra and her mother results from the fact that, like her daughter, Klytämnestra also regards herself to be acting according to Fate's orders and wishes: *'Mit Dikes Hilfe hab' ich Kindesmord,/ der Greuel ärgsten, so an ihm gerächt./ Was willst du mehr?'* (p.172) And she dies despite her conviction that everything she has committed was right just, that she has obeyed her Fate which has now commanded her own death to be committed with the same axe with which she had executed her husband. For the axe is a symbol of Fate controlling everything with its overwhelming power: 'In dem Drama *Elektra* ist das Beil das Symbol für eine von Gott gestellte Aufgabe, deren Erfüllung den

[14] Meinert, p.18.
[15] Meinert, p.18.

Menschen noch tiefer in Schuld verstickt als er es durch das Verbrechen seiner Vorfahren bereits ist.'[16]

[16] Meinert, p.104.

Historical-Political Influence

Although not directly involved in any political activities himself at any stage of his life, Gerhart Hauptmann lived during a period a time of great political changes. Undoubtedly, Hitler's rise to power, the Second World War and even more importantly Germany's destruction and mutilation after the end of the war are historical facts which were bound to have a strong influence on the writer in the last years of his life. Evidence of this is to be traced in his last plays and not least in the *Atriden-Tetralogie.*

Hans von Brescius, in his study of Hauptmann, mentions some of Hauptmann's comments on the situation in Germany in 1943 (7.12.1943) and stresses the similarity of atmosphere between the writer's surroundings and the setting of the *Atriden-Tetralogie*:

> Der orgiastische Wahnsinn.
> Eine Macht ohnegleichen und ohne Sinn.
> Die scheußliche Absurdität der blutigen Nachrichten.
> Noch immer versuch' ich dies und das:
> den Wahnsinn der Welt zu steuern.
> Aber die Welt ist vom Blute naß:
> Jahrhunderte müssen es scheuern!
> Verheeren [...]; das vor allem ist das Signum
> des heutigen Krieges.[17]

Brescius mentions that Thomas Mann also noticed the link between the tetralogy and the Hitler-era:

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[17] Hauptmann's comments as quoted in Hans von Brescius, *Gerhart Hauptmann, Zeitgeschehen und Bewußtsein in unbekannten Selbstzeugnissen* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1976), p.335.

> Solche Äußerungen können sicher als Hinweise auf eine Grundstimmung Hauptmanns gedeutet werden, wie sie in der düsteren Welt der *Atriden-Tetralogie* spiegelt, den 'Greisendramen' die 'völlig beherrscht sind von der Leidenskraft, da sich doch alle vier wohl ein Flüchten sind aus dem gewürgten Verstummen der Hitler-Zeit in die Masken der Blutwelt der Atriden.' (Thomas Mann)[18]

Hauptmann has been accused by some of his contemporaries of having supported the Hitler-regime. He certainly did not denounce the Nazis clearly - that in itself seems significant:

> Hauptmann kann weder den Nazis noch den Antinazis zugerechnet werden; vielmehr ist seine Haltung gegenüber der 'Bewegung' und ihrer Führern durch Naivität und Bequemlichkeit und ein schier unglaubliches Verkennen der politischen Realitäten gekennzeichnet.[19]

Another strong reason to suspect that Hauptmann approved of the Nazis is the fact that he stayed in Germany, while so many other men of letters fled into exile and thus demonstrated their opposition to the Third Reich and its leaders. Both von Brescius and Leppmann maintain that Hauptmann's not leaving Germany can be explained by the fact that he was not a rebellious type of person and that in his old age he was unable to give up the comfortable life he was used to. As Leppmann says:

> Er ist auch seit langem ein ans Wohlleben gewöhnter Mann auf der Schwelle zum Greisenalter, mit einer anspruchsvollen Frau und umgeben

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[18] Von Brescius, pp. 338-39.
[19] Wolfgang Leppmann, *Gerhart Hauptmann, Leben, Werk und Zeit* (Berne: Scherz, 1986), pp.359-60.

> von Helfern, die nicht durchweg über den Verdacht rechtsradikaler Sympathien erhoben sind. (p.364)

Hans von Brescius gives a similar reason for Hauptmann's not leaving the country. (p.227)

However, the reason for his not leaving the country is given by the writer himself on numerous occasions. His strong affection for Germany made it impossible for him to live anywhere else, especially in his old age. This particular attachment to his homeland is made clear in a speech given in Breslau on 13 August 1922 where he talks of Germany as an idea; those who believe in it have also faith in its power:

> Nichts anderes als Deutschland selbst ist diese Idee, die unsere Seele, unsere Worte, unsere Handlungen durchdringt und beflügelt. Und jede Seele, jedes Wort, jede Handlung ist halb, ja weniger als halb, die von dieser Idee nicht durchdrungen und getragen ist. Deutschland als Idee, das ist Deutschlands Kraft.[20]

He expressed his loyalty to his country again in a speech with the title 'Glauben an Deutschland', held in Bremen in 1932, which expresses his conviction that German drama can only exist in the future if the playwright is attached to German soil as strongly as he himself was:

> Dennoch halte ich daran fest, daß es ohne die allerengste Verbindung mit unserem vaterländischen Grund und Boden ein deutsches Drama in Zukunft nicht geben kann.[21]

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[20] Gerhart Hauptmann, 'Deutschland-Vaterland', in *Sämtliche Werke* (Berlin: Propyläen, 1963), p.752.
[21] Gerhart Hauptmann, 'Der Baum von Gallowayshire', in *Sämtliche Werke*, p.794.

Nevertheless, Hauptmann's thoughts and feelings on National Socialist ideology are rather unclear. With some of his statements and actions he appeared not to be strongly against - if not in favour - of the regime, while he is also known to have criticized National Socialism severely. Hans von Brescius comments on the confusion Hauptmann's ambiguous behaviour has created:

> Meist eingegeben von Stimmungen, lassen sich Hauptmanns private Äußerungen über das dritte Reich schwer auf einen Nenner bringen. Eine einseitig referierende Auswahl könnte Hauptmann jeweils zum schweigenden Märtyren, zum mehr oder minder ahnungslosen Mitläufer oder zum sympathisierenden Opportunisten stilisieren. (p.222)

For instance, he expressed himself enthusiastically about Hitler's 'Peace-Talk' on 17 March 1933:

> Die gestern gehaltene Rede des deutschen Reichskanzlers wird man noch nach einigen hundert Jahren hören! Diese Rede müßte man in ganz Deutschland anschlagen.[22]

As Hans von Brescius mentions, Hauptmann appears to have forgotten his former warning against orators. (p.231) In addition, Hauptmann seems to have studied Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* very carefully as his notes on his own copy of the book indicate. (p.233)

However, Hauptmann went a step further than merely expressing his personal interest in Hitler and his ideology. He tried to justify his adoption of the famous *Nazi-Gruß* by referring to it as a Roman and not a Nazi salute:

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[22] Von Brescius, p.230.

> Das Handerheben ist ein altrömischer, nicht deutscher Gruß! So sind wir Nationalsozialisten wieder einmal ein Kind von Rom. [...] Handaufheben ist der schönste Gruß den es gibt; [...] Es ist ein naturgemäßer Gruß, mag es römisch sein, [...] oder nicht. Wir leben [...] in unsichtbarer (Herrschaft) des in Europa unsterblichen alten römischen Reichs, wovon Göring, als ein später Kaiser, ein Redivivus ist.[23]

Equally surprising and unexpected was his attitude towards the Jews during the years of the Third Reich. Hans von Brescius, who expanded and tried to explain Hauptmann's attitude not only towards his Jewish friends, but also towards Judaism, refers first of all to Hauptmann's apathetic reaction to Hitler's antisemitic comments in *Mein Kampf*:

> Die Ungeheuerlichkeiten, die Hitler über die Juden und die Marxisten in *Mein Kampf* sagt, ließ Hauptmann großenteils durchgehen [...], weil er von der suggestiven und simplifizierten Suada dieses Buches eingefangen wurde. [...] Auch den antijüdischen Tiraden Hitlers widersprach Hauptmann kaum. (pp.236-37)

Hauptmann's unexpected attitude towards the Jews can also be observed in his personal conflict with his Jewish friends. The first instance is to be found in his marginal notes on *Mein Kampf*, where he supplied specific examples by making use of some of his friends' and collaborators' names at the point where Hitler was referring to Jewish theatre-critics in general.[24]

He seemed to have let his friends down at a time when they most needed his support. The first to express the disappointment of the Jews in Hauptmann and his actions was Gertrud Brahm, the daughter of Otto Brahm on 27 September 1933. Hauptmann was

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[23] Von Brescius, p.244.
[24] Von Brescius, p.238.

not merely a friend of Otto Brahm: Brahm was a founding member of the 'Freie Bühne' in Berlin in 1889, and helped to initiate Hauptmann's success as a playwright.[25] This could be the reason why Gertrud Brahm expected more of Hauptmann and for the strong words she used in her letter:

> Sie haben gute und anhängliche Freunde unter den Juden gehabt. (...) Aber ich möchte Ihnen sagen, daß wir Juden von Ihnen eher erwarten dürften, daß Sie uns hilfsbereit entgegenkommen [...] als eine Hakenkreuzfahne auf Ihrem Dache zu hissen, was heißen soll: 'ich schließe meine Türe vor Euch zu!'[26]

Unquestionably, the severest dispute was with the theatre- and book critic and art-correspondent Alfred Kerr who had been a close friend of Hauptmann's for many years. Kerr first published a warning to Hauptmann in July 1933:

> Dieser gar edle Dichter des Altruismus kriecht vor den Machthabern... und vergißt die Opfer. (...) Ich will nächstens mit ihm abrechnen. Er, er, er hatte die Pflicht, anders zu sein; auch wenn halb Deutschland etho-skrofulös ist.[27]

When Hauptmann completely ignored Kerr's warning he denounced him in public with a very aggressive letter with the title 'Gerhart Hauptmanns Schande'. Nonetheless, Hauptmann's relations to National Socialism and its leaders are ambiguous. Another Hauptmann biographer, Sigfrid Hoefert refers to one occasion on which, although the writer appeared to have expressed his acceptance of the regime, the Nazis still would not trust him:

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[25] *Deutshes Literatur-Lexikon*, ed. by Wilhelm Kosch (Berne and Munich: Francke, 1968), p.854.
[26] Von Brescius, p.243.
[27] Von Brescius, p.253.

> Im Herbst 1933 erklärte Hauptmann im 'Berliner Tageblatt' seine Zustimmung zum Austritt Deutschlands aus dem Völkerbund. Diese Erklärung enttäuschte viele Freunde und Anhänger; sie wurde als Anzeichen dafür gedeutet, daß er bereit war, sich den neuen Machthabern zu fügen. [...] Von den Nazis wurde Hauptmann jedoch mißfällig betrachtet; man traute ihm nicht und isolierte ihn.[28]

Hauptmann also had very strong opponents amongst the Nazis, as for instance the leading NS member Alfred Rosenberg who not only expressed his mistrust and dislike of Gerhart Hauptmann but described him as utterly worthless.[29]

This attitude towards Hauptmann and his work seems to have been widespread amongst the Nazis as in year 1934 there was a campaign against Gerhart Hauptmann demanding the banning of his plays. Ebermeyer describes the situation in the Ministry of Propaganda, based on the information he had received from his predecessor Scherler:

> [...] Das Halbverfemtsein geschieht Gerhart Hauptmann jetzt im Großen. Sein ganzes Werk steht für Deutschland auf dem Spiel. Goebbels will ihm nicht wohl, aber er würde ihn, wie ich höre, ungetastet auf kaltem Wege langsam absterben lassen. Die Rosenberg-Leute dagegen wünschen schärfere Mittel: Verbot seiner Werke und Zwang zur Emigration.- Kein Berliner Theater hat in diesem Herbst und zu seinem Geburtstag ein Hauptmann-Werk gespielt - ein einmaliger Vorgang seit fünf Jahrzehnten. Nur Scherler, selbst im Propagandaministerium und ein persönlicher Verehrer Hauptmanns, hat diese *(Florian)* Geyer-Premiere [...] in der Vorstadt durchgesetzt. Mit dem Urteil des Volkes, das sich heute abend

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28 Sigfrid Hoefert, *Gerhart Hauptmann* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1982), p.71.
29 Von Brescius, p.262.

wieder leidenschaftlich zu dem greisen Dichter bekennt, hofft man nun einen Druck auf die gegnerischen Kräfte in der Partei auszuüben.[30]

From all the information given above, it is very hard to establish what were Hauptmann's real thoughts on Nazi ideology. Any conclusion we may come up with is bound to be inaccurate. Nevertheless there is one thing which can safely be said about Hauptmann in the last years of the war, when he was watching Hitler's greed grow stronger all the time: his anxiety about the future of his beloved homeland was transformed into a deep pain when he could see the destruction approaching. He stated his disapproval and bitterness on the way Poland had been unnecessarily attacked and expressed his inability to come to terms with the destructive form of nationalism (30.12.1939):

> Nach dem Aufwachen drückten die Schrecken des Krieges auf meine Brust: Polen! Wieviel Haß hat er dort entfesselt. Wie ungeheuer wird der Deutsche dort gehaßt. Wir haben Polen vernichtet, zur Hälfte den Russen ausgeliefert, alle Rachegeister darin gegen uns aufgerufen für ein Jahrhundert. Warum ist überall und allenthalben in der Welt dieser gnadenlose Nationalismus erwacht?[31]

Hauptmann had an extraordinarily strong bond to his country. Its destruction, which he attributed to imperialistic policy and greed for power, completely shattered his world and signified his own end. He was unfortunate enough to experience at the end of his life Dresden's bombardment and almost total ruin on 14 February 1945. Dresden was associated for Hauptmann with happiness as he had spent there the carefree days of his youth, probably the most blissful ones of his whole life. Dresden's two-day long

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[30] Von Brescius, p.265.
[31] Von Brescius, p.299.

bombardment, which took place when Hauptmann was visiting his beloved town for the last time in his life as he could see his death approaching, was one of the severest shocks of his life. He expressed his deep grief in his article 'Dresden' which appeared in the daily press.[32] Three months later, on 9 May 1945 a unit of the Soviet 'Red Army' marched into Agnetendorf, the place where Hauptmann had spent most of his life. But he had already experienced the end of his Germany with Dresden's destruction: After that nothing seemed to upset him anymore.

His *Atriden-Tetralogie*, the last play of his life, is the literary product of Hauptmann's emotional state during the years of the war, and has also been regarded as Hauptmann's resistance-drama:

> Gleichwohl ist Vorsicht gegenüber Versuchen geboten, die allzu direkt Hauptmanns Spätwerk als unmittelbare, 'Widerstandsdichtung' gegen das Dritte Reich interpretieren. So schreibt Hans Meyer über die 1941/42 entstandene *Iphigenie in Aulis*: 'Es unterliegt keinem Zweifel, daß hier mitten im zweiten Weltkrieg eine Widerstandsdichtung gegen die Eroberungspolitik und Barbarei des deutschen Faschismus entstand und entstehen sollte.'[33]

In his Hauptmann biography Eberhard Hilscher sees the tetralogy as Hauptmann's way of describing the characteristic barbarism of the Hitler-era.[34] Sigfrid Hoefert refers to the unpopularity of the tetralogy, despite the critics' enthusiastic reception: 'Die Kritik rechnete die Tetralogie zu den überragenden Schöpfungen des Autors. Die Wirkung des Werkes unterstützt jedoch eine solche Werkschätzung nicht. Der Zyklus erwies sich als

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[32] Von Brescius, p.342.
[33] Von Brescius, p.339.
[34] Eberhard Hilscher, *Gerhart Hauptmann, Leben und Werk* (Frankfurt a.M.: Athenäum, 1988), p.475.

ausgesprochen bühnenschwach.'[35] This reception by the German audience may be attributed to the fact that the tetralogy may have been too distressing for them to watch; the world of decadence and destruction presented in the play could be seen as too accurate a depiction of their own situation. In the mutilated Germany of 1947, when the play was first produced, the shattered world of the Atrides must have had a painful connotation. Ancient Greek dramaturgy has a very similar example to present: the tragedy *Miletou Alosis* by Phrynichos, presented in 493 B.C. and having as its theme the destruction of the city of Miletos in Asia Minor by the Persians, was such a devastating experience for the Athenians who had witnessed the catastrophe not so long before that it was banned for ever.[36] On 7 December 1943 Hauptmann commented on the situation in Germany:

> Köln liegt in Asche, Stuttgart und Mannheim, Mainz, Leipzig, Frankfurt am Main, Hamburg, Bremen und Berlin etc. Was dreißig Jahre Frieden in Deutschland erbauten ist heute ein Trümmerfeld. Was für ein unsinniger Erfolg und zu welchem Ende herbeigeführt! Unter Menschen und mit der ihnen gegebenen Vernunft ist ein verständiger Grund nicht auszufinden. Bleibt das Irrationale, das Schicksal von Menschen und Welt als unbegreifliche Ursache übrig.[37]

This image of complete and utter destruction, the reality Hauptmann was living in, could also be described with the same words he used to present the setting of his *Atriden-Tetralogie* and particularly of *Elektra*, the last play he ever wrote, which stands chronologically closer to the end of the war and is characterized by darkness and an air of

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[35] Hoefert, p.75.
[36] In his study on Greek Theatre Rush Rehm notes that the dramatist Phrynihos was even fined a thousand drachmas for producing that tragedy. See Rush Rehm, *Greek Tragic Theatre*, p.22.
[37] Von Brescius, p.335.

decay. The play starts with a description of the scene. It is a horrendous place characterized by death and disintegration. This description strongly calls to mind Hauptmann's description of the ruined towns in Germany just quoted. *'Im Vergleich zu früher zeigt der Raum eine starke Verwahrlosung.'* (p.151) The deserted temple strongly reminds one of a place destroyed by an earthquake or the German towns ruined by the war. However, this is not the only reference to the ugliness of the place. Its horrid appearance is mentioned throughout the play, in the text as well as the stage directions. The playwright clearly meant to place particular emphasis on it.

The striking similarity in the description Hauptmann gives of the ruined towns in Germany and of the temple in Mycene which serves as the scenic background of *Elektra* may indicate that it was the writer's intention to give a symbolic identity to the play. He started working on the *Atriden-Tetralogie* at a time when the danger of Germany's destruction appeared to be imminent, and the work was completed with *Elektra* when the country was all but destroyed, mutilated, deprived of its power. It is therefore safe to assume that the fact that *Elektra's* scenery portrays an image of complete destruction and decadence cannot be attributed to a mere coincidence. Similarly, Orest's first reaction of repugnance may be based on the response of the exiled Germans who returned to Germany after the end of the war. To Orest, who had cherished a certain image of his country, the change is so dramatic that recognition is at first sight impossible. We know from Hauptmann's descriptions that Germany did not present a pleasant sight immediately after the end of the war. He refers to the towns destroyed by the bombs and expresses his grief for Dresden's destruction. If this was so painful a sight to Hauptmann, who never left the country and could see the end approaching, it must have been an even more severe shock to those who left Germany before the war. Like Orest they had preserved a certain picture of the country which was not to be found anymore after their return. Hence, their feelings must have been exactly the same: fear, horror, and an

unwillingness to admit that such a disaster could possibly have happened to their own country. The horror the two friends experience in that eerie place reaches its zenith when they realize that the ruins are actually inhabited. Hauptmann's strong attachment to his country would not permit him to leave it even when he could see so clearly that it was heading towards its disaster. Elektra, the heroine of the play seems to be filled with the same feeling of duty towards the place where she was born. She would not follow her brother in exile even when her own life was in danger, but nor would she submit to the murderers and usurpers of the throne, the tyrants of the country: she simply went on living in the ruins of the temple where her father was brutally assassinated, honouring his memory, isolated, in a state of utter misery. But to her brother Orest, who had experienced everything from a distance, under the shelter of a free country, the idea of somebody having lived there in the years of tyranny and having survived the catastrophe appears preposterous.

Although in exile, Orest kept hearing rumours about the situation in his homeland. Amongst other things he had been informed of the miserable conditions under which his sister was spending her life. After having come to the shocking realization that this horrendous place is indeed his country, he refers to what he has heard about his sister: *'Man sagt, die Mutter habe sie verflucht,/ sie ausgestoßen aus dem Kreis der Menschen;/ sie lebe drum nicht anders als ein Tier,/ scheu und verborgen und gehüllt in Wahnsinn.'* (p.155) As we have already observed, a certain analogy may exist between the character of Orest and the Germans who spent the years of the Hitler-regime and the Second World War in exile, mostly because they were Jews or persecuted because of their known ideological opposition to Hitler. Elektra, on the other hand, is equally comparable to those who never deserted Germany, Hauptmann himself amongst them. Bearing that analogy in mind, we can deduce that the scene of recognition between brother and sister may be

based on Hauptmann's reality. Even after having stated her identity, Orest finds it hard to believe that this creature from the Underworld can be his sister, the once proud princess.

Hauptmann's scene of recognition is the plainest created by any of the dramatists who have dealt with this myth. There are no tears of happiness, no recollection of the good old days. Orest is uncertain, suspicious, and negative. Elektra, in a very matter of fact manner, receives her brother as an ally but not in the least in the sentimental way one would expect. Having been through the destructive war Hauptmann was left with no chance of being emotional. Both parties, the ones in exile, and the others who chose to stay in their homeland, have been through much suffering. When they finally met, the necessity to reconstruct their country was so overwhelming that they could not afford to waste time with sentimentalities. In addition to that, the memories of their once beautiful, peaceful country must have been so painful, that it might have been preferable not to mention them.

Orest does not return to his homeland alone; he is escorted by his loyal friend Pylades, the one who had offered him refuge when he was forced to leave his country in order to save his life. Pylades is always there to support him in his weakness and to encourage him. However, he becomes frightened himself at the sight of Elektra, who appears like a ghost issuing from the interior of the deserted temple seeking revenge. No matter how cooperative he may wish to be, he is a stranger, he is not one of them, as Elektra reminds him: *'O Knabe, armer Knabe Pylades,/ was ahnst du von den Eisenbanden, die/ Oresten fesseln, fesseln so wie mich?'* (p.158) Although at first he encourages Orest to confront his destiny and stay in his country, he then tries to persuade him to leave as soon as possible, to come with him in the clean air, and also attempts to make Elektra flee with them. Elektra, who sees the danger of losing her brother, her only possible accomplice, for whom she had been waiting for so many years, emphasizes the strong bond between her brother and herself which excludes Pylades, as he does not feel

the same urge inside him. It is also characteristic that Orest, once has returned to the country of his birth, no longer wishes to escape but begins to feel close to his sister, the woman whom he not long ago thought of as mad: *'Trag'ich im Blute nicht uralten Fluch/ der Tantaliden?'* (p.153) He feels that the time has come for the curse finally to be lifted. Pylades, unable to understand his friend's sudden change, believes Elektra to be responsible and makes a last attempt to drag her away and save her and his friend from the death he can sense in the atmosphere. This attitude of Pylades is typical of people who wish to help their friends but cannot identify with them and cannot understand that the only way for them to recover is not by fleeing but by staying and confronting the situation face to face. Hauptmann's historical reality may have supplied him with a similar example. All the foreign friends who had offered asylum to the exiled Germans during the war, and who strongly wished to help them afterwards, must have found it hard to identify themselves with the Germans who wanted to return to the ruined country Germany was at the time and help to rebuild it. Despite their good intentions they could never comprehend the strong bond that held the Germans together, their belief in their tradition.

In addition, Elektra feels that she has a very important task to perform for which her brother's help is essential: to punish the murderers and usurpers of the throne. When talking of his sister's pitiful situation, Orest referred to the person who was mainly to blame for all of Elektra's suffering. The heartless mother who forced her son to live in exile and obliged her daughter to spend her days hidden in a haunted temple like an animal, Klytämnestra, chose to kill her husband, King Agamemnon, and usurp the throne at the most perfect time as she struck him in his weakness. Having just returned from a long and exhausting war, deprived of all his royal glory, Agamemnon was a very easy victim for Klytämnestra and her paramour and partner in crime, Aigisth. Elektra gives a brief outline of her father's regicide as he lay defenceless in his wife's hands: *'In diesem*

Tempel, Bruder, starb dein Vater/ durch deine Mutter, die ihn mit diesem Beil/ im Bade erschlug.' (p.158)

The people of the country at first welcomed indirectly the new order by remaining silent about the crime they all knew had taken place. In a similar way, Hauptmann mentions the need of his fellow-Germans for strong leadership after the exhausting First World War: 'Die geistige Desorientierung nach dem 1. Weltkrieg gab zwar einem im Vergleich zur Wilhelminischen Epoche ungewohnten Liberalismus Raum, erzeugte aber andererseits das Bedürfnis nach Führertum nicht nur auf politischem, sondern auch geistig-kulturellem Gebiet.'[38] He also exclaimed in July 1930: 'Heut ist Deutschland eine einzige Schlappheit - eine Schlaffheit! - eine Lächerlichkeit! - Ein Luther! wo ist er? - nicht religiös, sondern national.'[39]

Hans von Brescius maintains that Hauptmann was one of the people who at first welcomed National Socialism thinking that it would take the country out of the ideological and cultural stagnation. (p.192)

It becomes obvious that the conditions in Germany under which Hitler came to power could not have been more favourable for him. At a time when the people of Germany had started losing their national identity Hitler appeared to restore their shattered faith in themselves. It is possible that Hauptmann had this particular abuse of the German people's trust in mind when writing about Klytämnestra's usurpation of the throne. The situation after that is described by her daughter:

Kaum war der Mord am Vater hier geschehn,
so nahm die Mutter grausam mich in Haft;
sie gab dem Hungertod in Kerkermauern
mich preis, doch hatt' ich Helfer, wurde frei,

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[38] Von Brescius, p.189.
[39] Von Brescius, p.207.

wovon sie und Aigisthos nichts erfuhren.
Die Mörderhöhle hier ward streng bewacht,
wo Agamemnon unbegraben lag.
Jedweder, der von Klytämnestras Tat
zu wissen vorgab, wurde hingerichtet.
Auch von des Königs Heimkunft sprach man nicht,
wenn man dem sichren Tod entgehen wollte. (p. 160)

The total lack of freedom described here by Elektra is a characteristic element of all tyrannical, dictatorial regimes. The opponents are eliminated by force unless they manage to escape and hide themselves in remote places where they are out of reach. Although there is no direct proof of it, this can very possibly be the terrorizing situation Hauptmann and the other remaining Germans had to cope with during the years of the Hitler-regime.

It has already been mentioned that Elektra and Orest acknowledged the necessity to do away with the tyrants before being able to lead a free life again. In a similar way the *Entnazifizierung* which took place in Germany immediately after the war, although mainly inspired by the occupying forces, may indicate that the German people were also aware of the urgency to eliminate any scintilla of Nazism from the country. That would be the first step in Germany's reconstruction. Despite the obscurity in its atmosphere *Elektra* ends with a somewhat optimistic scene. After having committed the act of revenge, Orest and Elektra are standing bewildered, while a new day is dawning. It seems that at the end of his life and despite all the ordeals he had been through, Hauptmann never completely lost his optimism, his faith in regeneration. This can be the only reason for his statement in 1944 when no light of hope was yet to be seen: 'Zerbombte Städte:

grauenvoll. Aber der unsterbliche Mensch ist denn doch wohl das Hoffnungsvoll-Wesentliche.'[40]

[40] Von Brescius, p.40.

PART II:
THE SCENIC PRESENTATION OF THE SIX PLAYS

CHAPTER ONE:
GENERAL SCENIC CHARACTERISTICS OF ANCIENT GREEK TRAGEDY

Scenography was a theatrical element known and exploited by the ancient Greek dramatists. Aristotle regarded the 'Spectacle' (οψις) as one of the six components of drama. In his *Poetics* he mentions:

> There are six parts consequently of every tragedy as a whole, that is, of such or such quality, viz. a Fable, or Plot, Characters, Diction, Thought, Spectacle and Melody; two of them arising from the means, one from manner, and three from the objects of the dramatic imitation; and there is nothing else besides these six.[1]

In his commentary on Aristotle's *Poetics*, Ingram Bywater explains the term: '[opsis] is usually rendered by "spectaculum", "apparatus", or "scenery" or mise en scène;', though according to Twining 'it comprehends "scenery, dresses - the whole visible apparatus of the theatre."'[2] Aristotle, however, considered the 'spectacle' as the least artistic component part of tragedy:

> The Spectacle, though an attraction, is the least artistic of all the parts, and has least to do with the art of poetry. The tragic effect is quite possible

[1] Aristotle, *On the Art of Poetry* trans. by Ingram Bywater, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909), p.18.
[2] Aristotle, p.162.

without a public performance and actors; and besides, the getting-up of the Spectacle is more a matter for the costumier than the poet.[3]

Nevertheless, it becomes clear that although the scenic means of expression may not enhance the dramatic value of a play, it makes its stage production possible.[4] Despite the fact that he says little about the element of the 'spectacle', Aristotle admits that it may arouse tragic fear and pity. Finally, the importance he attaches to the 'spectacle' becomes clear when he argues that the addition of the two main elements of scenography and music, to tragedy make it a superior art to epic poetry.

The tragedians appreciated the necessity of scenography for the presentation of their plays; playing also the roles of a modern director, scenographer and costumier, they were responsible for inventing scenic devices.[5] As we learn from Aristotle, Sophocles was especially known for his innovations, which included big painted pictures placed at both sides of the main building on the stage, depicting sea, battle-fields or woods, according to the plot of the tragedy.[6] These pictures were not meant to imitate reality, but rather to stir the audience's imagination, so that they could follow the play more easily. However, this was not the only theatrical device. One of the most usual was the θεολογειον (theologeion), a small cabin placed on the top of the main building, from where the *dei ex machina* made their appearance. Another common apparatus was the αιωρημα (aiorima), a wooden crane which held the gods suspended in the air, as well as the εκκυκλημα (ekkyklima), a small platform-like vehicle, on which corpses were

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[3] Aristotle, p.23.
[4] see also Karl Weissmann, *Die scenischen Anweisungen in den Scholien zu Aischylos, Sophokles, Euripides und Aristophanes* (Bamberg: Fr. Humann'sche Buchdruckerei, 1896), p.2.
[5] In his study on Greek Theatre Rehm discusses the function of the playwright as a stage-director. See Rush Rehm, *Greek Tragic Theatre*, p.25
[6] In his *Poetics* (1449a.19) Aristotle notes that Sophocles introduced scene-painting and a third actor.

brought onto the stage. This last apparatus was necessary because deaths always took place offstage.[7]

The stage was divided into two parts, which did not communicate with each other. The σκηνη (skene) was the higher part of the stage where the protagonists performed; at first it was a wooden platform, later a stone one. At the back of the stage there was a wooden edifice, usually representing a palace or a temple with three doors, from the central one of which the protagonists appeared on the stage. The audience always assumed that the tragedy took place before a palace or a temple, unless otherwise indicated. This is the reason why the dramatists did not include stage-directions in their plays. If, however, the scenic background was neither a palace nor a temple, the stage-setting was indicated by the characters in the spoken text.

On the lower part, the ορχηστρα (orchestra), appeared the Chorus and the minor characters who did not come out of the palace or the temple. The presence of these characters was essential, as they usually gave information about an incident which was important for the plot but could not be presented on stage, as that would imply a change of scene. That was technically almost impossible, and also foreign to Greek drama. Two passages led to the orchestra: from the right appeared the characters who came from the town or the port; from the left those who came from the fields or other towns.

The most characteristic element of costume in ancient Greek theatre were the masks covering the actors' faces. At first they were made out of clay and later of leather. They were boldly painted and depicted the general character of the hero. The costumes were flamboyant and majestic, and were padded in order to make the actors seem enormous. On their feet they wore huge platformed shoes, which were called κοθωρνοι (cothornoi). Walking on them was rather difficult but it gave the actors' movements a

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[7] On the mechanical devices of Greek Theatre see also James Turney Allen, *Stage Antiquities of the Greeks and the Romans and their Influence* (New York: Longman Green, 1927), p.100.

ceremonious quality. The huge costumes were necessary as in the big open-air theatres of the time a normal-sized human body would appear too small to convince the audience of the superiority of the tragic heroes.

Unfortunately, these are the only scenic elements known to us, basically from depictions on vases. Nevertheless, they are examples of the writers' concern about the stage production of their plays.

CHAPTER TWO:

SCENERY

1. Aischylos: *Choephoroi*

Aischylos' play *Choephoroi* is divided into two parts. The first takes place at Agamemnon's grave and the second before the palace of the Atrides in Mycene. Aischylos' departure from the tradition of presenting a tragedy before a temple or a palace suggests that he attached great importance to the motif of the tomb as a symbol. Orestes and his devoted friend Pylades come back to Argos after many years of exile. Orestes first visits his father's grave and offers him libations: it is by this grave that he meets his sister Electra, whom he has not seen for years. The grave appears to symbolize the reunion of the family, as H.D.F. Kitto suggests in his study on Greek Tragedy.[8] All members of the family are joined together in blood: Clytemnestra is linked to Agamemnon through the murder she committed; their children are united with each other, because of their common decision to kill, with Agamemnon, because it is for his sake that they are going to commit matricide, and finally with their mother as she is going to be their victim. The grave is a sacred place: this is where Agamemnon's children pray to the gods, asking for their help and support in order to accomplish their difficult task. In doing so they are also united with the gods. Finally, the grave has yet another symbolic meaning: it marks the beginning of Orestes' and Electra's mutual future: until the moment of their reunion they have led different lives. Electra was imprisoned in the palace, Orestes grew up in exile. Now they find each other and decide to act together. For the first time they have the same aim: to avenge their father's shameful murder.

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[8] H.D.F. Kitto, *Greek Tragedy*, 3rd edn (London: Methuen, 1961) pp. 83-84.

After praying by his father's grave, Orestes decides to act and enters the palace as a stranger accompanied by his friend Pylades. It is in this palace that Agamemnon met his death; consequently, this is the right place for his murderess to be executed. The difference between the two parts of the play is immediately noticeable. The first part is static; the protagonists pray to the gods for the fulfilment of their plan, but nothing happens: the plot does not develop. The lack of action is indicated by the presentation of the tomb on stage, a motif which suggests stillness. However, the second part is characterized by action. The two friends enter the palace under a false identity, ask for and meet the queen, and finally kill her and her lover. Now the palace monopolizes the stage. In *Agamemnon*, the first play of the trilogy *Oresteia*, - of which *Choephoroi* is the second part - the audience overheard Agamemnon's cruel murder, which was committed in the palace. In their minds, therefore, the scenic motif of the palace is associated with action. Orestes' entering it suggests that something drastic is about to happen again. Oliver Taplin in his book *Greek Tragedy in Action* refers to the stage setting of the *Choephoroi* and discusses the contrast between the two dominant motifs. He rightly observes that 'in the middle of *Choephoroi* the scene changes or "refocuses".'[9] It becomes evident that the two basic elements of the stage setting - the grave and the palace - play an important role: they notify the audience of what is going to follow, they function as a form of non-verbal introduction.

Nonetheless, the unusual change in the stage setting in the *Choephoroi* creates a technical difficulty. Agamemnon's tomb could not be realistically presented on stage. It would be impossible to move it during the play (when the action is transferred to the palace) and if it remained it would confuse the audience. Moreover, the palace had to be present all the time as it was part of the stage. Peter Arnott proposes an explanation which seems plausible: the stage altar, present in all dramatic performances in order to remind

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[9] Oliver Taplin, *Greek Tragedy in Action* (London: Methuen, 1978) p. 24.

the audience of the religious origin of drama, must have represented the tomb. He suggests that while Orestes and Electra are praying there, it is the tomb; when the action shifts, it merges once more into the general architectural background and has no special importance.'[10] This argument is also supported by the constant verbal repetition of the word 'tomb'. Apart from underlining its symbolic meaning, this repetition also serves a more practical purpose: the spectators have to be reminded of the presence of the tomb because it is not immediately recognizable as such. This explains why Orestes has to inform the audience in the beginning of the play that he is standing before his father's tomb, something that would be unnecessary if they could see it for themselves.

[10] Peter Arnott, *Greek Scenic Conventions in the Fifth Century B.C.* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962) p. 59.

2. Sophocles: *Electra*

Although famous for his scenic innovations, Sophocles is the least informative of all the dramatists about the stage conditions of his tragedies. From both the Aischylean and the Euripidean texts it is possible to deduce some information about the setting; Sophocles, however, rarely includes stage directions in the spoken text of his tragedies, as he almost always conforms to the standard practice of setting the entire play in front of a palace or a temple. Therefore, it is not necessary for his characters to state their whereabouts. In this sense, his tragedies are closer to a modern, realistic play in which the setting is not described in the spoken text.

Sophocles' *Electra* also begins with the arrival of the avenger Orestes and his two devotees - his friend Pylades and his old pedagogue - in Mycene. He goes immediately to the palace where the whole play is set. Orestes knows his duty and is determined to perform it. There is no need for him to pray to the gods by Agamemnon's tomb, as they have ordered Clytemnestra's punishment. Orestes is certain, therefore, that his deed will be under their aegis. Without any doubts or inhibitions he goes straight to the palace and meets his sister who is also determined to kill her mother, even alone if need be.

Moreover, the fact that Sophocles chooses not to include in his tragedy the prominent Aischylean motif of Agamemnon's tomb may suggest that the wish to avenge his father's murder as an act of honour is not the main reason for Orestes' decision to commit matricide. The re-establishment of the shattered order appears to be his first priority when he enters the palace in order to punish the usurpers and claim back his father's throne.

3. Euripides: *Electra*

Euripides sets his play in the most unexpected of places: outside a poor, isolated cottage in the vicinity of Argos. Ignoring the tradition, according to which a tragedy usually takes place in front of a majestic temple or palace, Euripides presents a setting of poverty and humbleness: Electra's dwelling. The spectators are informed about it by Electra's husband, the first character to appear on stage. In doing so Euripides departs significantly from the myth as presented in the two other tragedies on the same theme. In both the *Choephoroi* and in the Sophoclean *Electra* the heroine, although in mourning for the loss of her father and tormented by her mother, is still presented as a princess, residing in the palace. However, Euripides' Electra spends her life in humiliation, married to a humble farmer, who respects her and her royal descent but is not able to offer her the life-style a princess would deserve. Euripides' main aim is to show how poverty and humiliation have affected Electra. She is not responsible for the transformation in her character: she has grown to be evil, jealous, revengeful, and cunning, whereas her counterparts in the other two tragedies have kept their royal pride.[11] Euripides' Electra is planning Clytemnestra's murder. However, her motivation for the crime is neither her will to preserve the family honour nor her duty to re-establish the moral order. She wishes to see her mother dead mainly out of jealousy, as the latter leads a happy, luxurious life, of which Electra feels she is unjustly deprived. Euripides' play takes place neither in the solemn Aischylean atmosphere, nor in the heroic, impressive Sophoclean one. His characters are simple people, living in simple surroundings, with human feelings and needs. The unadorned stage setting is, therefore, suitable and accords with Euripides' down-to-earth mentality.

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[11] On Electra's personality in Euripides' tragedy see also Kitto, p.334.

4. Hugo von Hofmannsthal: *Elektra*

Hugo von Hofmannsthal drew attention to the importance of the scenery in his play by releasing the 'Szenische Vorschriften zu *Elektra*' in 1904. He first describes the stage setting: the play takes place in the gloomy back-yard of the palace of the Atrides surrounded by narrow buildings, windows and doors which lead nowhere: 'Der Character des Bühnenbildes ist Enge, Unentfliehbarkeit, Abgeschlossenheit.'[12] Furthermore, he stresses its oriental, mysterious character: 'Die Hinterwand des königlichen Hauses bietet jenen Anblick, welcher die großen Häuser im Orient so geheimnisvoll und unheimlich macht.'[13] A big, old fig tree, leaning against the roof of the palace, and covering almost the whole courtyard, makes the setting appear even more suffocating by hiding even the slightest sun-ray. It also gives it a spooky quality, as it resembles a dragon guarding something. The lack of space and fresh air immediately indicates a lack of freedom. The lack of sunlight and the horrible stillness imply a lack of life; the atmosphere is reminiscent of the interior of a tomb. It gives the impression that its residents have no contact with the outside world, that nothing penetrates their grotesque surroundings. Moreover, the dark Oriental facade and the dragon-like fig-tree point to a hidden secret. Elizabeth Steingruber in her book *Hugo von Hofmannsthals Sophokleische Dramen* refers to the effect these surroundings must have on the inhabitants of the place:

> Es muß schwer sein, in diesem Hof zu atmen, spürt man sofort sehr stark und dann das andere, daß es nur der gewaltigsten Anstrengung vielleicht gelingen möchte, aus diesen Mauern zu entrinnen in die hellere Luft hinaus.[14]

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[12] Hugo von Hofmannsthal, 'Szenische Vorschriften zu *Elektra*' in *Gesammelte Werke*, Dramen II (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1979) p. 240.
[13] Hofmannsthal, 'Szenische Vorschriften', p. 240.
[14] Steingruber, p.101.

Apart from the 'Szenische Vorschriften' Hofmannsthal also describes the setting at the beginning of the play: *'Der innere Hof, begrenzt von der Rückseite des Palastes und niedrigen Gebäuden, in denen die Diener wohnen.'* (p.187) The Athenian audience knew exactly where and when the events they were watching took place, because of their knowledge of the myth and their familiarity with the basic principles of Greek drama: in *Choephoroi* it was the tomb and the palace of Agamemnon a few years after his assassination; in the Sophoclean *Electra* it was the palace of the Atrides, and Euripides' tragedy was set at Electra's cottage near Argos. However, as Hofmannsthal's audience could hardly be expected to be acquainted with the details of the Atrides-myth, one might presume that the writer would indicate at the beginning of his play the place and time of the events which are about to take place. But, in *Elektra* no such information is given. Hofmannsthal's focal point was not the exact recreation of the myth. He was more interested in highlighting the importance of the psychological state of the characters and their relationship to one another. Therefore, the precise indication of the exterior elements of the play, such as place and time, is unnecessary: the gloomy backyard could be anywhere, anytime. The significant point is its influence on the characters and, most importantly, the impression it creates on the audience.

5. Eugene O'Neill: *Mourning Becomes Electra*

Eugene O'Neill also appreciated the importance of the stage-setting in his trilogy.[15] In a long, detailed description he states all the exoteric characteristics of the scenic background which consists mainly of the flamboyant, impressive Mannon residence and its grounds. The mansion is located in the outskirts of a small New England town and the events take place a few years after the American Civil War, but he underlines its resemblance to an ancient Greek temple:

> *It is a large building of the Greek temple style that was the vogue in the first half of the nineteenth century. A white wooden portico with six tall columns contrasts with the wall of the house proper which is of grey cut stone.* (p.9)

In his *Working Notes and Extracts from a Fragmentary Work Diary* he states the kind of building 'fits in well and is absolutely justifiable (not forced Greek similarity).'[16] Furthermore, he justifies his selection of the New England environment as the 'best possible dramatically for Greek plot of crime and retribution chain of fate-Puritan conviction of man born to sin and punishment...'[17] An article in the New London newspaper *The Day* on O'Neill's scenic images, mentions the playwright's familiarity with this particular kind of residence:

> Moreover, the row of stately houses with Grecian columns on Huntington Street [in New London, CT] known as Whale Oil Row, was probably in

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[15] As *Mourning Becomes Electra* consists of three plays and O'Neill attaches great importance to the stage-setting in both the stage directions in the text and in his notes, far more scenic elements than in the other plays have to be taken into consideration and, therefore, this section has to be longer.
[16] Eugene O'Neill, *Working Notes and Extracts from a Fragmentary Work Diary*, at Yale University.
[17] O'Neill, *Working Notes*.

> the playwright's mind as he conceived the new-Grecian abode of the Mannons, forbidding with pillars in *Electra.*[18]

O'Neill must have been acquainted with the tradition in ancient Greek drama, according to which a tragedy is usually set before a palace, or a temple. The extravagant appearance of the Mannon residence demonstrates the wealth of its residents; thus it may be considered as a kind of palace, especially as the Mannons are the most well-respected family in the town. By following the Greek tradition, O'Neill combines the two characteristic ancient scenic motifs - the palace and the temple - and creates a temple-like palace. Timo Tiusanen, in his study on scenic images in O'Neill's plays, regards the exterior of the house as a dominating element in the trilogy and refers to its multiple symbolic function:

> Above all, it is an artistic symbol with multiple layers of meaning; it contains references to the Mannon dead, to their repressed way of living in that prison, to Greek tragedy. It is remarkable that this central scenic means of expression is at the same time the most prominent and least artificially contrived Greek element in the plays. The steps in front of the house might perhaps be called an immovable kind of cothurni, used to give stature to the isolated Mannon family.[19]

The first reference to the house is made by Minnie, a townswoman secretly brought to the house by Seth, the old housekeeper. She is struck by its appearance: *'My sakes! What a purty house!'* (p.18) To Minnie, representing the innocent townpeople who admire the Mannons and their wealth and fame, the house appears beautiful. However, Christine Mannon who lives in it expresses a different opinion. To her it is an ugly

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18 *The Day*, 2, July, 1981, New London, CT.
19 Timo Tiusanen, *O'Neill's Scenic Images* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1968) p. 235.

building built by Abe Mannon, Ezra's father, as a temple of Hatred and Death; significantly she often refers to it as a tomb:

> *I felt our tomb needed a little brightening. [...] Each time I come back after being away it appears more like a sepulchre! The 'whited' one of the Bible - pagan temple front like a mask on Puritan grey ugliness! It was just like old Abe Mannon to build such a monstrosity - as a temple for his hatred!* (p.34)

The fact that O'Neill makes Christine refer to the house as a tomb may suggest his familiarity with Aischylos' stage setting. Although the motif has a totally different symbolic function in the two plays, it is possible that O'Neill arrived at the idea after reading the *Oresteia*. The utilization of the Aischylean scenic element, together with the fact that O'Neill wrote a trilogy, indicates that it was Aischylos' adaptation of the myth that set the example for O'Neill's modern version.

The white portico with the archaic columns functions as a mask hiding the ugliness of the grey building behind it. The outsiders are easily deceived by it and mistake it for a pleasant abode, whereas the people who live in it know the truth. Especially for Christine with her lively free nature, the house is a prison, the tomb where she feels buried alive. Her intense dislike for the house also implies her hatred for all the Mannons: Abe Mannon who started the dynasty of hatred, her husband Ezra whose conservatism deprived Christine of life and happiness, her daughter Lavinia, whose temperament suits the dark character of the house.

Ezra Mannon's personality is perfectly depicted in the description of his study in the first scene which takes place in the interior of the house. It is a severe, austere, undecorated room, with nothing to beautify it. Even the pictures on the walls are not adornments; on the contrary, they accentuate the atmosphere:

On the right wall is a painting of George Washington in a gilt frame, flanked by smaller portraits of Alexander Hamilton and John Marshall. [...] Above the fireplace, in a plain frame is a large portrait of Ezra Mannon himself, painted ten years previously. (p. 51)

The selection of the portraits indicate that Ezra Mannon is characterized by a strong sense of duty towards his country. They depict important personalities, whose contribution had been valuable for the development of the country and whose presence in Ezra's room remind him constantly of his own responsibility. Egil Törnqvist stresses the significance of the presence of the portraits in Ezra's room:

> It is significant, that the portrait of Ezra is surrounded, not by those of his ancestors (they are in the sitting room), but by those of his idols. No doubt this arrangement is partly due to a wish on O'Neill's part to make it clear, that the study is Ezra's room, and his alone, whereas the sitting room is the Mannon room in general.[20]

Christine Mannon feels suffocated in Ezra's room, which underlines even more their differing personalities. Lavinia chooses this room to confront her mother with her knowledge of the latter's adultery. While Christine openly demonstrates her repugnance for the room, Lavinia, who is characterized by the same strong passion for justice as her father, seems to consider it the most appropriate place for their conversation:

CHRISTINE:

(looking around the room with aversion) But why in this musty room of all places?

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[20] Egil Törnqvist, *Symbolism in the Plays of Eugene O'Neill*, p. 335.

LAVINIA:

(indicating the portrait quietly) Because it's father's room. (p.52)

Christine's feeling of uneasiness in Ezra's study becomes obvious further on, in the scene of her conversation with Adam Brant where she informs him that Lavinia has found out about their affair. At first she has an awkward feeling about talking to her lover in her husband's room, she can sense the latter's presence all around her. But she changes her mind on a second thought: *'No! I've been afraid of you long enough, Ezra!'*. (p.65) However, her change of mind is only temporary, as she soon realizes that the house possesses a malignant quality, which can endanger her and Adam's happiness: *'I never should have brought you to this house.'* (p.66) It becomes evident to her that love is a deadly sin in the temple of hatred and that she will have to be punished.

In the next scene of the play Ezra Mannon returns from the war. He seems to have changed completely. In the horror of war he realized that he could have died without having lived before. He returns determined to change his puritanical attitude and enjoy pure, free love with Christine. He speaks with disgust about the dreadful experience of his childhood when he used to attend meditation services with his family in a white meeting house, whose exterior resembled the Mannon residence. By indicating his aversion for that house he denounces his former life-style. However, it is already too late. Christine has made up her mind; his change leaves her unaffected. She poisons him in his bedroom which, like his study, is indicative of his mentality. Again, it is a plain, unadorned room with only that furniture which is absolutely necessary. Christine's hatred for it makes it even easier to commit the murder there, as it constantly reminds her of the long unhappy years of her marriage.

The second play of the trilogy 'The Hunted' begins with Orin's return from the war a day after his father's funeral. He is immediately struck by the house's odd, spooky

appearance which, for the first time, reminds him of Christine calling it a tomb. Before going to war Orin was an innocent, ignorant child growing up with the love of his mother without even knowing the existence of hatred. Like the townpeople in the first scene of the 'Homecoming' he was fooled by the mask covering anything ugly and detestable. But the war had the opposite effect on him to that which it had on his father: whereas it made Ezra discover love and peaceful life, it opened Orin's eyes to hatred and death. Having spent such a long time surrounded by death, he can easily recognize it the moment he sees it. Although Lavinia tries to justify the house's ghastly appearance by reminding her brother that their father's dead body is lying in it, Orin still senses that the cause is more profound than that.

The next scene of Orin's first meeting with his mother takes place in the sitting-room of the Mannon residence, which *'like the study, but much larger (it) is an interior composed of straight severe lines with heavy detail.'* (p.131) Once more, only the absolutely essential furniture can be found in the room with its suffocating, depressing atmosphere. The only thing that could beautify the room, the mantelpiece, is made of black marble and adds to the mournful character by its resemblance to a tomb. The dominant elements in this room are the portraits of the dead Mannons:

> *Portraits of ancestors hang on the walls. At the rear of the fireplace, on the right, is one of a grim-visaged minister of the witch-burning era. Between fireplace and front is another of Ezra Mannon's grandfather. [...] Directly over the fireplace is the portrait of Ezra's father, Abe Mannon.* (p.131)

All these portraits depict the Mannon conservatism and give a severe quality to the room. Törnqvist notes that even the professions of the dead Mannons are suggestive and intensify their Puritanism and greed: 'The professions from Ezra's grandfather's

grandfather onwards [...] are characteristic New England ones, reflecting the psychological traits of the Mannons: greed, intolerance, life-denial, stiffness, aloofness, and ability.'[21] Furthermore, the presence of Abe Mannon's portrait in the centre also fills the sitting-room with an air of evil, as, according to Christine, he is the one who founded the temple of hatred.

The fourth act of the second play is the only act that does not take place immediately outside or inside the Mannon residence. Instead it is set on a clipper moored alongside a wharf in East Boston. O'Neill refers to this act as the central scene of the whole trilogy:

> With the one ship scene at the center of the second play (this, center of whole work) emphasizes sea background of family and symbolic motive of sea of means of escape and release-[22]

This comment reveals the crucial role of the scene for the whole trilogy. It is in the centre of action, as the first part of the trilogy was heading towards this scene, Adam Brant's murder. Christine's adultery, Ezra's murder, Lavinia's determination for revenge, Orin's disappointment and rage at the discovery of his mother's love affair, Adam's infatuation with Christine, all led to the same point: Adam's murder. And this murder is the cause of Christine's suicide, Orin's insanity and suicide, Lavinia's liberation and self-condemnation. This scene is the link between the two halves of the trilogy. As O'Neill pointed out in his notes, this act has a symbolic function as well. It is the only scene that is not set at the Mannon house. Its setting by the sea, and furthermore, on a ship, evokes famous archaic symbols of liberation, escape, hope. All Mannons try to escape from the house and go away through the sea. But they all fail: the sea proves to be nothing but a

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[21] Törnqvist, p. 349.
[22] O'Neill, *Working Notes*.

sham, a negative utopia. In reality they are all bound to their destiny, symbolized by the Mannon house.

After having met Adam in Boston, Christine comes back to the Mannon house unaware of his death and is more than ever affected by the house's deadly quality. She tells Hazel, who has offered to keep her company and stay the night with her: *'You can't know the horror of being all night alone in that house!'* (p.193) Without knowing it, Christine is approaching her own death and that makes the house resemble a tomb even more. Its ghastly appearance is also mentioned in the first scene of the first act of 'The Haunted' (the third part of the trilogy), where Lavinia and Orin return after a long trip abroad. Seth, who is aware of the evil quality the house possesses tries to save the last Mannons by driving them away. He first mentions the need to leave to Peter and Hazel, the only people attached to Lavinia and Orin:

> *Taint bosh, Peter. There's been evil in that house since it was first built in hate - and it's kept growing there ever since, as what's happened there has proved. You understand I ain't saying this to no one but you two. And I'm only telling you fur one reason - because you're closer to Vinnie and Orin than anyone and you'd ought to persuade them, now they're back not to live in it. [...] Fur their own good!* (p.219)

While Peter is still too innocent to believe in evil and therefore reluctant to take Seth's words seriously, Hazel appears to be affected by the housekeeper's words which call to her mind her own feeling of aversion towards the house. The fact that she witnessed Christine's agony just before she died, together with Seth's warnings, makes her scared about the future. Orin experiences the same feeling of uneasiness when he first sets eyes on the house after having been away for a long time. Although he is supposed to have recovered from the severe shock caused by Christine's suicide, he starts behaving in an

awkward way when he sees the house. He refuses to look at it at first and eventually does so only in response to Lavinia's commands. Orin looks frightened, as if he could see Christine's ghost wandering around in the house, haunting it. Even the once pure and loving Hazel is now able to feel hate. She loathes the house which seems to be taking Orin away from her, and does not realize the change in herself: she is now capable of hatred.

After Orin's suicide Lavinia tries to convert the house into a place of peace and joy by filling it with flowers. Although she is aware of the impossibility of her task, to introduce life and happiness into the Mannon tomb, she tries her best to create an illusion, to overcome her fear and live in spite of everything. But she can deceive neither herself nor Seth: they both know that there is no rest in the temple of hatred. Lavinia declares her intention of going away and leaving the house and its ghosts behind her:

> *I'll close it up and leave it in the sun and rain to die. The portraits of the Mannons will rot on the walls and the ghosts will fade back into death. and the Mannons will be forgotten.* (p.276)

But in the end she is forced to surrender to her destiny: like all Mannons she is doomed to live and die in the house, she has to punish herself. She enters her grave ready to live alone with the dead until *'the curse is paid out and the last Mannon is let die.'*

6. Gerhart Hauptmann: *Elektra*

Gerhart Hauptmann's one-act play *Elektra* starts with the return of Orestes and his friend Pylades to Mycene. Without realizing it, they enter the temple of Demeter in the vicinity of Mycene where Agamemnon's murder has taken place, as Hauptmann notes in his stage directions. The temple has changed completely since it was first presented in *Agamemnons Tod*, and that explains the two friends' inability to recognize it: it is deserted, with a haunted atmosphere, mainly created by the half-burnt bones and ashes which can be seen everywhere and a human skeleton hanging in one corner. Within the temple there are three primitive wooden images of Demeter, Persephone and Pluto. The door which leads to the bath where Agamemnon was slaughtered is left ajar: *'Aus dem ebenfalls zerfallenen Bad steigt häßlicher Dampf.'* (p.151) The first words they utter refer to the ghastly, terrifying appearance of the place:

PYLADES:
Ein fürchterlicher Ort!
OREST:
Der fürchterlichste, den ich jemals sah.
Ein Haufen Trümmer, würd' ich sagen, Schutt,
ging nicht ein seltsam Wesen davon aus.
Sieh welcher Qualm: wie Pestgewölk von Hades!
PYLADES:
Weh uns, wo sind wir hingegangen! (p.151)

They feel that they have entered the world of the dead. After the initial shock, Pylades starts to realize that the temple looks familiar to him. He recognizes it, but becomes simultaneously aware of a great destructive power hidden in it. He senses the existence of

a living curse. The repetition of the word *fürchterlich* indicates the fear and horror the two friends experience. Before they have time to recover from the shock, they see a shadow emerge from the ruins. Their panic reaches its zenith when they hear the ghostlike creature warning them against the evil qualities of the temple and begging them to run away: *'Kehrt um: hier ist der Tod! Kehrt um ins Leben!* (p.155) These words seem to confirm their suspicions: there is no doubt now that this place belongs to the kingdom of Hades. The creature they see standing in front of them can only be a phantasm, as Pylades' words indicate: *Nie standen wir am Rand des Tartarus/ bisher und redeten noch nicht mit Toten.* (p.156) Their surprise grows even more when the lifeless creature reveals her identity: she is Elektra, the lost sister Orestes was hoping to find again. In a few words Elektra explains everything about the place to the two stunned friends: it is the place where Agamemnon met his death through Klytämnestra's murderous hand. The curse Orestes could sense existing there is his father's blood demanding revenge. His sister refers to the goddesses of Fate (the Moirai) who have transformed this once holy and blissful place of worship into hell. Elektra, who now possesses the mantic powers of the seeress Kassandra, Agamemnon's Trojan slave and paramour murdered in the play *Agamemnon's Tod*, recognizes her brother immediately, although she has not seen him since his childhood. She describes Agamemnon's murder, in an attempt to awake his feelings of filial duty towards his father's memory, stressing the significance of the place where the crime was performed:

> *ELEKTRA:*
> *So recht, mein Bruder! Und nun hör mich an:*
> *In diesem Tempel, Bruder, starb dein Vater*
> *durch deine Mutter, die mit diesem Beil*
> *im Bade ihn erschlug.* (p.158)

Elektra's words hint that it is time for the matricide to be committed, and that the avenger has finally come to the place where the act of vengeance will be executed. This is the place that she has been guarding for so many years, living with ghosts, and almost becoming a ghost herself. Pylades, unable to disguise his fear, begs Elektra to let them leave, to forget about the revenge, to go with them to the clean world, outside, to leave the dead behind, and to live with the living. He senses the horrible destiny they are all bound to and attempts in vain to change Elektra's mind. But Elektra has dedicated herself to the idea of matricide and will only be fulfilled when it has actually taken place. Her only function is to stay at the temple and wait for her victim to appear.

A few minutes later a storm breaks out and Elektra rejoices as she knows that Klytämnestra and her husband Aigisth are out hunting and will seek shelter in the deserted temple. The tension in the atmosphere is accentuated by the light and sound effects which accompany the storm. The couple does indeed appear and Klytämnestra, like Orestes and Pylades at the beginning of the play, cannot hide her abhorrence for the place:

> *KLYTÄMNESTRA:*
> *Dem Himmel Dank,*
> *sagst Du? Mir aber graust - gesteh' ich dir -*
> *beinahe, Freund, vor solchem Schutzort mehr*
> *als vor dem Graus, dem wir entkommen sind.* (p.163)

Although she appears to have no recollection of the temple or the deed she herself had performed there, she is aware of something evil in the atmosphere and becomes scared for her and Aigisth's life. She insists that she can sense danger in the temple and prefers battling with rain and wind, something natural she can see and defeat, rather than trying to gain a victory over something unknown and supernatural. Her fear grows so strong that

she cannot suppress it any longer and, like Pylades, she wishes to leave as soon as possible. In her subconscious she recalls the place and the deed she once committed there and it is her subconscious that warns her to run away. But it is already too late: her Fate has brought her there and she cannot escape it any longer. Pylades comes out of his hiding place, describing the temple to her in every ghastly detail, guiding her into her grave:

PYLADES:
Ein übler, wie ich keinen mir ersehnt
zeit meines Lebens. Halbverkohlte Knochen
starren aus grauer Asche überall:
hier ein Schädeldach, Gebeine hier und da.
Fluch steigt aus allem auf, wie ein Gewölk:
es ist ein mörderischer Schacht fürwahr,
von Leben zeugend, das mir schlimmer scheint
als hundertfacher Tod. (p.164)

Although Klytämnestra can feel death all around her she is still unable to see that it is her own death Pylades is talking about. He is leading his victims astray, just as they did the unsuspecting Agamemnon. He describes their death-place, witnessing their agony rising. And suddenly the truth is revealed to the couple by Elektra who hisses like a poisonous snake:

ELEKTRA:
Nimm, Königin, die Antwort denn von mir!
Dies ist der heilige Ort, an dem der Größte
in Hellas schuldlos starb: sein heiliges Grabmal

und das verfluchte Grabmal einer Gattin,

die seine war und ihren Herrn erschlug. (p.166)

Klytämnestra finally realizes that the tomb Elektra is talking about is her own, that her fate has brought her to her death-place, the same place where she once struck her victim. She tries to escape from the trap but all her efforts are useless. Before handing her victim to the avenger Elektra reminds her mother of her crime. Klytämnestra, after trying unsuccesfully to justify her deed, realizes that there is no way out, accepts her fate and cursing him follows her son into the bathroom where the matricide is to be executed.

It becomes evident that although all six dramatists were concerned about the stage-setting of their plays, they each had different views about including scenic details in the text. It is also worth noting that all of them chose a different scenic background for their play, which can only be explained by the fact that they were writing in different times and for different audiences. This suggests that the stage-setting of each play was formulated according to the historical and cultural character of each era. Aischylos' tragedy is characterized by the pious atmosphere of his time, while Sophocles' *Electra* depicts the realism and the belief in the human power of the Golden Age and Euripides' play conveys the disillusion and materialism of the generation of the Peloponnesean War. The suffocating setting in Hofmannsthal's *Elektra* is perfectly comprehensible if one bears in mind the philosophical and psychological theories circulating in Vienna in the turn of the century, whereas O'Neill's selection of setting becomes clear after one becomes acquainted with the details of his own shattered life. Finally, the air of decay characteristic of wartime Germany is reflected in the spooky temple of Demeter in Hauptmann's *Elektra*, written in 1944. As Alan M.G. Little rightly remarks in his book *Myth and Society in Attic Drama*, 'the décor reflects alike the society of the time and its psychology.'[23]

Although the Greek dramatists had to include implicit stage-directions in the spoken text for practical reasons - this being the only means of describing the scenery, as they could not technically present it on stage - the modern playwrights used this technique mainly in order to accentuate the function of the scenery or to convey its possible symbolic meaning. The introduction of mechanical devices enabled the presentation of a realistic and convincing or symbolically meaningful scenic background on stage.

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[23] Alan M.G. Little, *Myth and Society in Attic Drama* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942) p. 76.

CHAPTER THREE:

LIGHTING

The 'stage-directions' given in the spoken text of the Greek tragedies known to us suggest that the ancient dramatists were aware of the atmospheric and symbolic function of lighting. However, as they did not have the convenience of electricity, they were unable to make their setting appear realistically dark or light. Moreover, the natural light of the sun could be of no use either, as the presentation of the tragedies started early in the morning and went on until late evening during the festivities in the honour of the god Dionysus. Thus, it was common that a tragedy which was supposed to be set in darkness was performed in broad daylight. The only medium available to the dramatists to indicate the lighting of their dramas was the spoken text. The protagonists usually referred to the time of the day in which the events of the tragedy took place, and also mentioned certain natural elements - the sun, the stars and the moon - to indicate whether it was a sunny or a rainy day, a dark or a starlit night. This description was meant to help the audience, who were called to use their imagination in order to picture the lighting of the play. Rush Rehm notes on this particular point:

> Guided only by the actors and the text, the Greek audience themselves created the pre-dawn atmosphere at the opening of *Agamemnon* and *Iphigeneia in Aulis* and the pitch-black darkness of *Rhesus*, even as they sat under the bright sun.[24]

Another element, which was also used as method to specify the lighting, were the costumes, and more rarely, certain scenic devices. An instance of that can be found in Aischylos' *Choephoroi*, where the black-dressed women of the chorus and the severe tomb emphasize the dark character of the scene.

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[24] Rehm, p.38.

1. Aischylos: *Choephoroi*

The play starts with Orestes and Pylades arriving at Agamemnon's tomb just before dawn. The sun has not risen yet, as indicated by Orestes' words. In the twilight he can discern a dark party approaching:

> *ORESTES:*
> *Look, a company moving toward us.*
> *Women, robed in black... so clear*
> *in the early light.*(vs.11-12) [25]

It is a group of women dressed in black who come to the tomb bringing libations. Darkness dominates the scenery and creates an eerie and heavy atmosphere. The stage is empty but for the tomb and the black-dressed women who also refer verbally to the obscure atmosphere inside the palace:

> *CHORUS:*
> *But Justice waits and turns the scales:*
> *a sudden blow for some at dawn,*
> *for some in the no man's land of dusk*
> *her torments grew with time,*
> *and the lethal night takes others.* (vs.61-65)

Their words intensify the impression of darkness, as in addition to the dark scene the spectators imagine (created mainly by their black robes and the heavy tomb), they also hear a description of a gloomy place. Aischylos' emphasis on darkness cannot be coincidental. Orestes returns to his birthplace with a macabre mission to acccomplish: a

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[25] Aischylos 'Choeohoroi', in *Oresteia* trans. by Robert Fagles (London: Wildwood House, 1975) vs.11-12.

matricide. He is pure and innocent, but the omen of the gods is clear: he must avenge his father's murder by killing his mother. He comes to Mycene feeling weak and indecisive; but he knows that he must obey the gods although the deed he is asked to perform is difficult and horrifying. The obscurity of the scenery suggests his inner dilemma, his confused thoughts and emotions. The tragic irony is that while Orestes tries hard to overcome his spiritual darkness and prays to the gods to enlighten his soul and mind, everybody else regards him as the light that has come to save them from the darkness:

ELECTRA:

I call out to my father. Pity me,

dear Orestes too. Rekindle the light that saves our house.(vs.135-37)

Electra begs her brother to illuminate the gloomy palace with his deed, the women of the chorus express their certainty that Orestes is the light they had been waiting for. Even his victim Clytemnestra cannot help noticing the light surrounding him. The whole tragedy becomes a battle between light and darkness. But the liberator and illuminator sinks deeper into his darkness after having committed the expiatory crime and sees the Furies surrounding him, haunting him:

ORESTES:

No, no! Women - look - like Gorgons,

shrouded in black, their heads wreathed,

swarming serpents! (vs.1048-50)

His loathsome deed was a blessing for Electra and the women of the chorus who found their freedom, and for Agamemnon's soul which could at last rest in peace. However, for Orestes it meant losing his purity, sacrificing his innocence. It was something that had to

be done as he was executing a divine command. In the light of the freedom he has created Orestes finds himself in darkness.

2. Sophocles: *Electra*

The Sophoclean *Electra* is a luminous play. The landscape is illuminated by the twilight as the new day dawns - a sunrise which coincides with the return of Orestes.[26] Again, the lighting is indicated by the following words:

> *SERVANT:*
> *The dark blanket of stars is put away*
> *And birds are carolling the rising sun.* (vs.16-17)[27]

It is a sunny, peaceful morning, a pretty setting, sweetened by the happy twitter of the birds. Orestes comes back in order to kill the usurpers of his father's throne and to liberate the suffering people of Mycene. This liberation is the main point of the tragedy. Even if the salvation of his country involves a murder - a matricide in particular - the avenger has no doubts that his deed is right. He does not follow the divine command; he follows his own instinct, his own impulse, he is not tortured by dilemmas and dark emotions. His mind is as clear as the new day and it is the shining quality of his mind that brightens up the scenery. He characterizes himself as a luminary, a bright star, that has come to do away with the darkness in the palace. This is not an immodest expression of his egotism but rather his strong inner power which fills him with courage and determination.[28] Even Electra's appearance, despite her deep grief for Agamemnon, is not associated with darkness. With her first words she addresses the sky, the light and the wind, entrusting

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[26] Kitto's suggestion that the whole tragedy save this first scene is characterized by a sombre atmosphere does not seem accurate as all characters appear linked to light, to which they refer constantly throughout the play.

[27] Sophocles, *Electra* trans. by Kenneth McLeish (London: Methuen, 1990) vs.16-17.

[28] In his study Seale refers to the link between Orestes' shining personality and the brightness of the setting. See David Seale, *Vision and Stagecraft in Sophocles* (London: Croon Helm, 1982), p. 57.

her pain to them. She chooses the sunlight and not the darkness as companion to her bereavenent:

ELECTRA:
Light of the morning,
sky-canopy above,
As the shadows of night
Melt into day, hear me:
I am desperate with grief,
I tear my own flesh raw. (vs.86-91)

Later she compares herself to the nightingale, who heralds the spring with its sad singing, and informs her devoted friends, the women of the chorus, that she will not cease mourning as long as the sun and stars shine in the sky. Even mourning is associated with bright light. In the same way, the naturalistic, horrendous narration of Orestes' fake fatal accident is illuminated by the hero's bravery.

The whole tragedy is a hymn to the power of the human psyche, which leads to victory and redemption, to love which defeats hatred and fear, and to hope which shines and melts away horror. Orestes and Electra are not besieged by the Furies as was the case in the Aischylean adaptation of the myth. The light of justice burns inside the two heroes and according to it their deed was just and right. Sophocles succeeds in transmitting his message to the audience by setting his tragedy in bright, diaphanous daylight.

3. Euripides: *Electra*

It is still night when the play begins: when the heroine appears she immediately addresses the dark night and the golden stars. As we have already seen, the play takes place outside her humble cottage; she herself is dressed in dirty old clothes. It is only natural for somebody who has royal blood in her veins and used to live in a palace to be ashamed to appear in the daylight and to try to hide her humiliation in the darkness of the night. From the very beginning of the tragedy it becomes obvious that Euripides' *Electra* is a dark play, with a musty atmosphere. However, the darkness Euripides creates as the scenic background of the drama is different from the one observed in *Choephoroi.* In the majestic Aischylean tragedy the sombre atmosphere was associated with supernatural and psychic powers, whereas in the Euripidean version darkness is merely the result of a life spent in shame and humiliation, and in hatred which derives from jealousy for those who enjoy the luxury of a royal life-style. It is during the night that Electra chooses to go out and do her domestic work, embarrassed to reveal her disgrace to the bright sun. It is also during darkness that Orestes chooses to make his entry:

> *ORESTES:*
>
> *During the night just passed I found my father's tomb.* (vs.90)[29]

Both Electra and Orestes entrust the night with their secrets. Electra's secret is the wretched life she is leading, his is the fear which he tries to hide in the darkness: he has come back to perform the act of vengeance; however, he is not characterized by the strength of his Aischylean and Sophoclean counterparts. Frightened that he could be seen and recognized, he approaches his father's tomb secretly, he dreads going into the city and

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[29] Euripides, *Electra* trans. by Emily Townsend Vermeule (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939).

hides in the countryside. Here, therefore, darkness conveys the psychological state of both Electra and Orestes by suggesting the former's shame and the latter's fear. When the day begins to dawn, Electra returns to her humble cottage and Orestes hides:

ORESTES:

And now, since lady dawn is lifting her white face, smooth out our footprints from the path and come away. (vs.102-103)

The irony at this point is that Orestes, the scared child, is the brave hero Electra is expecting as the bright light that will guide her out of her humiliating darkness, so that she will no longer be ashamed to mourn in the day-light.

After Orestes has killed Aigisthos, the setting is lit up:

ELECTRA:

O flame of day and sun's great chariot charged with light,

O earth below and dark of night where I watched before, my eyes are clear now, I can unfold my sight to freedom. (vs.866-68)

However, a deep gloom surrounds Electra and Orestes almost immediately after the matricide has been committed. Their guilty conscience takes the form of dreadful monsters and haunts them until the Dioskouroi are required to offer a solution. Even after committing the crime which was supposed to bring them delivery and happiness, they cannot overcome their phobias. Unable to alter their lives, they have to seek again shelter in the darkness.

4. Hugo von Hofmannsthal: *Elektra*

There is no doubt that Hofmannsthal's *Elektra* is a dark play. Only a few pale sun-rays reach the shadowy back-yard where the action takes place. The fact that the stage-setting is not completely dark but full of shadows creates a more horrifying effect, for darkness can also be associated with quiet and peace whereas shadows point to an eerie atmosphere, indicating uneasiness. In his 'Szenische Vorschriften zu *Elektra*' Hofmannsthal refers to the lighting of his one-act play:

> Anfänglich so wie bei Beschreibung des Bühnenbildes angegeben, wobei der große Wipfel des Feigenbaumes rechts das Mittel ist, die Bühne mit Streifen von tiefem Schwarz und Flecken von Rot zu bedecken. Das Innere des Hauses liegt zunächst ganz im Dunkel, Tür und Fenster wirken als unheimliche schwarze Höhlen.[30]

As the scenic element of lighting has been considered in the chapter on Hofmannsthal's turn to alternative means of communication, the only point worth stressing here is the fact that Hofmannsthal departed from Sophocles' example by setting his version of the tragedy against an obscure background. The reason for this deviation can be explained if we bear in mind Hofmannsthal's wish to depict the inner world of his characters.

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[30] Hofmannsthal, 'Szenische Vorschriften', p. 241.

5. Eugene O'Neill: *Mourning Becomes Electra*

The title Eugene O'Neill chose for his 'modern Greek trilogy' introduces the spectator to the general atmosphere of all three plays. *Mourning*, associated with black, apart from suggesting a dark and heavy scenic background, also acquaints the audience with the main characteristics of the heroine, as it is linked to her name. O'Neill explained his title in his *Working Notes and Extracts from a Fragmentary Work Diary*, introducing us into the obscure world of the Mannons:

> Mourning Becomes Electra - that is, in old sense of the word - it befits - it becomes Electra to mourn - (it is her fate) - also, in usual sense (made ironical here), mourning (black) is becoming to her - it is the only color that becomes her destiny [31]

When the curtain rises *'it is shortly before sunset and the soft light of the declining sun shines directly on the front of the house.'*(p.15) The whiteness of the columns as well as the greyness of the house behind are intensified. One gains the impression that this is a peaceful setting, its beauty and tranquillity highlighted by the pale light of the sunset. However, there is one detail in the description that points to something completely different; *'the white columns cast black bars of shadows on the grey wall behind them.'* (p.15) O'Neill, making use of the same motif already observed in Hofmannsthal's play, introduces the element of shadow in order to create an atmosphere of vague uneasiness and mystery. The prominently accentuated contrast between the white columns of the portico and the grey building behind it makes the spectator wonder about its possible symbolic function. As will be made clear later on in the trilogy, the white portico serves as a facade, hiding the ugliness of the house, and keeping the secrets of the Mannons.

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[31] O'Neill, 'Working Notes'.

The only other colour that appears in this first scene is green: *'[...] the green of the open shutters, the green of the lawn and shrubbery, the black and green of the pine tree.'* (p.15) If grey can be regarded as a chromatic symbolization of the severe and Puritanical Mannon life-style, and the white of the portico may indicate their attempt to keep their secrets to themselves, green may also have a symbolic function: O'Neill uses it as an element of Paganism, of pure, sinless love and freedom. It is significant that green is Christine Mannon's favourite colour. (see p.254) But in this first scene, despite the presence of green, the emphasis is concentrated on the greyness of the house. Egil Törnqvist notes that 'the somber, grey house with its black bars of shadows is closer to a prison than to a pagan temple, a visual symbol of the life-denying Puritan spirit.'[31] In this first description of the exterior of the Mannon residence, O'Neill gives an outline of the whole trilogy: the battle between deeply rooted Puritanism and liberating Paganism and the triumph of the former. The importance of the colours is emphasized by O'Neill's insistent repetition of them in the set descriptions for the various acts showing the exterior of the Mannon residence.

The second act of 'Homecoming' is set in the interior of the house and takes place in dim twilight, which eventually gives way to complete darkness:

> *Outside the sun is beginning to set and its glow fills the room with a golden mist. As the action progresses this becomes brighter, than turns to crimson, which darkens to sombreness at the end.* (p.51)

Clearly, the interior matches the exterior as the same contrast between dark and light can be observed. Again, the most accentuated visual motif is the dark shadow which falls on the walls and plain furniture of the austere room which is Ezra Mannon's office. In fact, every scene of the trilogy is set either in the darkness of the night, or in dimly lit rooms. It

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[31] Törnqvist, p.323.

is as if the psychological state of the Mannons had influenced their environment. It is in this setting that the confrontation between Christine and Lavinia takes place: its outcome is again given non-verbally, in colours and shades: the golden mist, accompanying the conversation between the two women, may suggest the uncertainty they both have about each other's actions; they cannot as yet see each other clearly. Christine does not suspect that Lavinia is aware of her love-affair, and Lavinia does not know of her mother's vague murderous thoughts. The colour turns crimson as Christine makes up her mind to murder Ezra and she is eventually covered with darkness, as she is left alone with a dark deed in her mind. Her exclamation: *'the moonlight is so beautiful!'* (p.82) just before Ezra's arrival suggests that Christine feels uncomfortable in the bright light. Having a dark secret to hide, she finds shelter and relief in the night which makes her feel safe. The light of the half moon in this particular scene falling on the faces of the two rivals, Christine and Lavinia, illuminates the facial resemblance between them and makes even more evident their deep hatred for each other. The soft light creates an eerie atmosphere, and, although no crime has been yet committed, the air is full of bad omens. The link between dark shadows and the Mannons is again underlined in the scene of Ezra's first appearance: *'he stops short in the shadow for a second.'* (p.80) By placing himself in the shadow Ezra emphasizes that he belongs in the darkness of his puritan attitude; his doing so also suggests that he subconsciously senses his imminent death. Nevertheless, Ezra appears determined to break this link, to change, to illuminate his life. He wishes to talk to Christine in bright light: *'We'd better light the light and talk a while.'*(p.99) Having spent all his life in the sombreness of the Mannon residence, he has seen his family members dying in it and realizes that life and happiness are connected with light and Christine's love. Nevertheless, it is too late, as Christine has already made up her mind to kill him. She has learned to live in darkness, she has grown afraid of light:

CHRISTINE (with dread):

I don't want to talk! I prefer the dark!

MANNON:

You like the dark where you can't see your old man of a husband, is that it? (p.99)

Ezra fails to see that what Christine is actually afraid of is that her husband could read her evil thoughts in the light. Having lived so many years in the Mannon house she has realized that evil is associated with darkness.

Nevertheless, Ezra's death does not bring the desired happiness in Christine's life. The pale moonlight and the dim candlelight in the following scene, two days after his murder only illuminate his portrait and corpse, making his presence more evident than ever, driving Christine mad with fear: *'Two stands of three lighted candles are at each end of the black marble chimneypiece, throwing their light above on the portrait and below on the dead man.'* (p.153) In her desperate attempt to save herself from the Mannon ghosts Christine follows her impulse which takes her to Boston, where she is hoping to find comfort in the arms of Adam Brant. What she fails to notice is the darkness following her, transforming the ship of happiness, which is supposed to carry her and her lover away, into a black mass, identical to the Mannon house, her tomb: *'The moon is rising above the horizon off left rear, its light accentuating the black outlines of the ship.'*(p.168) Just before Adam's murder the scene fades into complete darkness. Even the pallid moonlight disappears, drawing our attention to the imminent death.

After Christine's suicide Lavinia and Orin leave on a long voyage in order to leave their ghosts behind them. However, they are met by them the moment they come back. The closed shutters of the house, which create an utter darkness inside it, have preserved all the evil and hatred, something that makes Orin feel uneasy: *'Why are the shutters still*

closed? Father has gone. We ought to let in the moonlight.' (p.199) Like Ezra, Adam and Christine, and later Lavinia, he wishes to let the light (which once again is nothing but a dim moonlight) enter the house. Like all of them he cannot see that he is the one causing, attracting the darkness: being born a Mannon, he is linked to it. However, like all the Mannons, he is forced to accept his fate. He does not try to avoid darkness any longer; instead he shuts himself in a dark room, hiding in it, like his mother, his evil secrets and his guilty conscience:

> *ORIN:*
>
> *I hate the daylight. It's like an accusing eye! No, we've renounced the day, in which normal people live - or rather it has renounced us. Perpetual night - darkness of death in life - that's the fitting habitat for guilt!* (p.245)

He finally commits suicide, warning Lavinia, the last Mannon, that it would be useless to try and bring light into her life: *'Darkness without a star to guide us! Where are we going, Vinnie?'* (p.245) All the Mannons who have tried before her have died in darkness. Lavinia is also forced to accept her Mannon fate. Instead of dying, she inflicts on herself the worst punishment by burying herself alive in the absolute darkness and letting her ghosts haunt her. For the first time in the trilogy the scene is lit up by bright sunlight: *'She ascends to the portico - and then turns and stands for a while, stiff and square-shouldered, staring into the sunlight with frozen eyes.'* (p.288) However, the sunlight has come too late into Lavinia's life, after she has taken the decision to spend the rest of her life in darkness. The frozen look in her eyes might indicate that she is trying to capture some sun-rays so that her mind will be able to reconstruct an illusion of light while she is slowly rotting in darkness.

6. Gerhart Hauptmann: *Elektra*

Following the tradition of Hofmannsthal and O'Neill, Hauptmann makes his *Elektra* a dark play. The action is set in a sombre, spooky, deserted temple during the night. However, a basic difference can be noticed between the darkness in Hauptmann's *Elektra* and that of the other plays, for Hauptmann presents two different sorts of darkness: the natural, peaceful, calm darkness of the night and the horrifying, evil supernatural sombreness of the deserted temple of Demeter. Orest and Pylades arrive in Mykene in the dusk, and as they can immediately sense the evil atmosphere in the temple, they wish to return to the safe, pure night. Pylades tries to encourage his friend by referring to a natural phenomenon, to the bright daylight following the night. He fails to realize at first that the night in this haunted place is perpetual. As the curse of the Atrides does not lie upon Pylades's shoulders, he can be optimistic about the future, whereas Orest, who feels the weight of his family's guilt, does not believe in the existence of the sunlight, of a brighter future. His sister Elektra, who feels the same curse, emerges from a dark background, the only habitat suiting her obscure personality. On seeing her, Orest becomes frightened and tries once more to persuade his friend to run away. In his attempt to calm Orest, Pylades alludes to the protective light he senses inside him:

> *PYLADES:*
> *Mut, Orestes, mich feit,*
> *vom Gott in mich gepflanzt,*
> *das innere Licht.* (p.156)

In contrast there is no internal light for Orest. He feels surrounded by a mysterious gloom and all he wants is to escape. Nevertheless, it becomes clear to him that he will only see the light again after he has performed the deed the gods have ordered. And indeed, after

the matricide has been committed, there are no ghosts in Orest's life any longer: *'Orest schreitet aufrecht ins Freie, wo ein Morgen tagt.'* (p.178) He is free to go on with his bright life, as all that happened in the haunted temple was nothing but a dark nightmare.

CHAPTER FOUR:

COSTUMES

1. Aischylos: *Choephoroi*

Electra and the women of the Chorus approach Agamemnon's tomb at the beginning of the play dressed completely in black. Their appearance is justified by the fact that they are mourners bringing libations to the dead king's grave, and therefore black would be the appropriate colour to wear. However, the motif of the black-dressed women could be regarded in connection with the element of darkness (expanded on page 233) in combination with which it creates the severe, grieving atmosphere of the first part of the play. Furthermore, the black-dressed party is identical to the black Furies who are going to haunt Orestes towards the end of the tragedy; the beginning of the play gives to the audience a first impression of its end.

Orestes appears at his father's grave dressed simply as a wanderer. For the spectators of ancient Athens, who had also seen the first part of the trilogy *Agamemnon*, the contrast between his humble appearance and that of Agamemnon must have been shocking. Dressed as a real king, majestic, imposing, proud, Agamemnon illuminated the stage, his personality dominated the play. In antithesis, the party of the black-dressed women forms the focal point in *Choephoroi*, as its title indicates. Orestes' plain and unadorned appearance does not distract the audience's attention from them and stresses their importance as a motif.

2. Sophocles: *Electra*

The main character of the play, Electra, is dressed in old, dirty rags which on no account indicate her royal origin. What the audience see on stage is a proud, decisive, dynamic woman dressed as a beggar. In this way Sophocles may have wanted to show his audience that external appearance is not indicative of a person's character and personality, as social convention has made us believe. In spite of her poor clothes Electra possesses a strong inner power. In contrast, her frightened, obedient, cowardly sister Chrysothemis is smartly dressed as if she were trying to cover her weakness with extravagant clothes. She and Clytemnestra, whose flamboyant, shiny dress cannot hide the wickedness of her character, are the extreme contrast to Electra. Finally, it becomes evident that one of the main roles Chrysothemis and Clytemnestra perform in the tragedy is to shed light on the character of Electra and make her appear even nobler despite her poor dress which contrasts so strikingly with their vanity.

3. Euripides: *Electra*

The heroine of Euripides' tragedy is poorly dressed in dirty, old clothes she has made herself, as she does not hesitate to say in her first appearance outside her humble cottage. From her words one can deduce that she resents the way she looks and feels humiliated because she cannot afford to wear the royal clothes she used to wear in her father's palace. The Sophoclean Electra also appeared dressed in dirty rags. However, this was her choice, it was her way of demonstrating her opposition to her mother and Aigisthos. In addition, her strength of character would not allow her to care about something as vain as looks and clothes. Her Euripidean counterpart, who does not have the characteristics of a powerful heroine, finds it unbearable to be seen in old clothes. It is worth mentioning that the Chorus, composed of village-women, sympathizes with Electra and offers to lend her nice clothes to attend the feast of the goddess Hera. While discussing the importance of clothing in Euripides' *Electra*, Rush Rehm suggests that Electra's poor clothes are indicative of her attitude:

> In *Electra* the embittered protagonist bemoans her rags and poverty, and makes much of the water-jug she hauls back from the spring. However, she ignores her husband's offer of help with the water-carrying and rejects the chorus's gifts of more festive clothing, revealing herself to be oppressed by wilful self-martyrdom as much as by circumstance.[32]

The humble appearance of Electra is of great importance for the development of the play because it justifies and explains her hatred of her mother and her desire for vengeance. Clytemnestra's murder is dictated neither by a god nor by Electra's passion for justice. It can be seen as the expression of Electra's envy of her mother, who is still

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[32] Rehm, p.66.

wearing flamboyant clothes and whose slaves are better dressed than Electra herself. She is primarily driven to persuade her brother to commit the matricide by her yearning for all her mother possesses and for her luxurious life. Electra's jealousy is so strong that she speaks ironically to her when Clytemnestra is about to enter the cottage without knowing that Orestes is waiting inside to kill her. Electra warns her mother to be careful not to soil her beautiful clothes in the dirty cottage, knowing all along that Clytemnestra's dress is going to be stained with her own blood. Clytemnestra's impressive first appearance - she arrives on a magnificent carriage, covered in jewellery and followed by her extravagantly dressed maids - succeeds in making the contrast to Electra even more obvious: it becomes easier for the audience to sympathize with the suffering heroine. Their pity is aroused and leads them to catharsis.[33]

Orestes is dressed simply, whereas Electra's humble husband and Agamemnon's old devoted servant are poorly dressed to indicate their affection and sympathy for Electra and their intention to comfort her and stand by her side.

[33] On the contrast between the two women created by their clothes see also Kitto, p.337.

4. Hugo von Hofmannsthal: *Elektra*

Elektra is the first character to appear on stage: 'Elektra trägt ein verächtliches elendes Gewand, das zu kurz für sie ist. Ihre Beine sind nackt, ebenso ihre Arme.', notes Hofmannsthal in his 'Szenische Vorschriften zu *Elektra*'.[34] Her rags are old and dirty, indicative of her disagreeable situation and her suffering. She seems to be aware of the expressive power of her clothing and uses it. She constantly reminds the gods of their injustice and, more importantly, she reminds her mother of her guilt, of her past she is desperately trying to forget.

In contrast,

> Klytämnestra trägt ein prachtvolles grellrotes Gewand. Es sieht aus als wäre alles Blut ihres fahlen Gesichtes in dem Gewand. Sie hat den Hals, den Nacken, die Arme bedeckt mit Schmuck. Sie ist behängt mit Talismanen und Edelsteinen.[35]

She is trying to demonstrate her royal power by wearing glamorous clothes and valuable jewellery, which only accentuate her psychological torment. Her fear of the avenger's return has made her superstitious: she is covered in stones and talismans hoping that they will save her from her haunting nightmares: *'Darum bin ich so behängt mit Steinen. Denn es wohnt in jedem ganz sicher eine Kraft. Man muß nur wissen, wie man sie nützen kann.'* (p.202) The tragic irony is, however, that without realizing it she is dressed in a blood-red dress which points directly to her imminent death.

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[34] Hofmannsthal, 'Szenische Vorschriften', p.242.
[35] Hofmannsthal, 'Szenische Vorschriften', p.242.

5. Eugene O'Neill: *Mourning Becomes Electra*

As the title of the trilogy points out and O'Neill explained in his notes, mourning - black - is the only colour that befits, becomes Lavinia. It is not surprising therefore that we first see her in a severe, plain black dress which conceals her attractiveness. As she claims to be a real Mannon, her father's daughter, she imitates the Mannon style and hides her obvious physical resemblance to her mother. In every single scene before Christine's death she appears dressed in black. It is only after her mother's suicide and her trip with Orin to the Blessed Isles that she starts wearing colour; she now wishes to demonstrate her femininity and attractiveness and therefore abandons the austere Mannon style: *'She now bears a striking resemblance to her mother in every respect, even to being dressed in the green her mother had affected.'* (p.202) Having seen life and pure love on the South Sea Island has made her realize how close her real nature is to that of her mother: she takes the place of her mother and steals her colours, as her dialogue with Peter reveals:

PETER:

I can't get over seeing you dressed in colour.

You always used to wear black.

LAVINIA:

I was dead then.

PETER:

You ought always to wear colour.

LAVINIA:

[...] Do you think so?

PETER:

Yes. It certainly is becoming. (p.233)

However, she had spent so many years trying to prove she was a true Mannon that the realization that she is her mother's daughter after all comes too late and proves to be too weak to save her from her Mannon destiny. After having known joy and love, and after having worn colour she is forced to return to black and mourning, which is the only colour which suits her fate.

Christine is the first female character to appear on stage, her smart and expensive dress highlighting her striking beauty: *'She wears a green satin dress smartly cut and expensive, which brings out the peculiar colour of her thick curly hair.'* (p.20) In contrast to her daughter, Christine is not ashamed of her feminine attractiveness. The green colour of her dress - the colour of nature - may indicate her desire for natural life and love, and her attempt to introduce life into the Mannon grave. The contrast between the two main female characters is highlighted in the confrontation scenes between them. Christine's luxurious green dresses, indicative of her personality, seem even more provocative in comparison to Lavinia's severe black: *'Christine appears outlined in the line from the hall. She is dressed in a gown of green velvet that sets off her hair.'* (p.78)

The only time that Christine presents herself dressed in black is when she goes to Boston to meet Adam. The obvious reason for this change is that she is dressed in black to avoid recognition, but it may signify something deeper: Christine is approaching her death. This is the last time she sees Adam, whose death will lead her to suicide. It seems that at this point Christine changes roles with Lavinia: she retires from life, starts wearing black and gives Lavinia her turn to discover the pleasures of life and to wear colour.

The three main male characters of the trilogy always appear dressed in uniforms:

> *He [Ezra Mannon] is a tall, spare, big boned man of fifty dressed in the uniform of a Brigadier-General.* (p.80)

He [Orin Mannon] is dressed in a baggy ill-fitting uniform - that of a first lieutenant of infantry in the Union Army. (p.124)

He [Adam Brant] is dressed in a merchant captain's blue uniform. (p.171)

It is obvious that O'Neill wanted to emphasize their similarity to one another and indeed they have a lot in common: all of them are Mannons and feel the curse of their ancestors haunting them. They all wish and try to escape their Mannon fate with the love and help of Christine whom they all worship almost as a deity. They all hope to find redemption and happiness with her on the *Blessed Isles*. Yet, none of them ever succeeds in materializing his dream: Ezra is poisoned by Christine, Adam is shot by Orin, Orin shoots himself. Christine, whom they all thought would guide them to life, led them to death. The similarity in the way they are dressed emphasizes their common fate.

6. Gerhart Hauptmann: Elektra

Orest and Pylades, the first characters to appear on stage, are dressed as wanderers: *'Orest and Pylades treten zögend von außen unter die Haupttür im Anzüge von Wanderern: Hüte, Felljacken, Stöcke.'* (p.151) Their appearance at once indicates that they are strangers who do not belong to the place and who have travelled from far away. In addition, the fact that they are dressed in simple clothes implies that they wish to hide their royal origin.

There is no direct indication of Elektra's clothing, but from the frightened expression on Orest's face when he first sees her we can deduce that her general appearance is horrifying. We picture an unearthly, weird creature, resembling a ghost, probably dressed in ugly torn rags.

Klytämnestra and Aigisth, though the text does not specify the costumes they are wearing, must be recognizably dressed as queen and king as Pylades and Orest immediately assume their identity.

CHAPTER FIVE:
MOTIFS AND SYMBOLS

1. Aischylos: *Choephoroi*

a. Clytemnestra's shroud

One of the main objects which function symbolically within the tragedy is Clytemnestra's shroud, the cloth her dead body is wrapped in after the matricide.[36] It is of great importance, as it is the same cloth Agamemnon's corpse was covered with after his murder in the first part of the trilogy. The shroud links Agamemnon and Clytemnestra with each other and with their children, who share the same guilt. Like the grave and the palace, the shroud re-unites the family in death.[37]

b. The lock of Orestes' hair

When he visits his father's tomb, Orestes leaves a lock of his hair on the gravestone. According to ritual, this was the appropriate thing to do for the son who visits the place where his parent is buried. It shows his grief and pain for the loss of his father and symbolizes his intention to sacrifice a part of himself to the memory of the dead.[38] However, it also has one more function. For Electra it is the proof that her brother is alive and has come back and that he has forgotten neither his disgracefully murdered father nor his duty to avenge the crime. The lock of Orestes' hair is thus a tangible evidence of what Electra had been praying for since her father's death: she is not alone any more, her brother shares her pain. Like the shroud, the lock of hair reunifies the family members: it

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[36] On the symbolic function of the crimson robe in the Oresteia see also Little, p.74.
[37] In his introduction to his translation of the *Oresteia*, Robert Fagles refers to the same motif.
[38] Taplin (p.3) notes on this point: 'In Greece, as in many other societies the hair was cut in connection with certain important social rituals: entry to adulthood, mourning, for example and perhaps claiming paternal heritage.'

connects Orestes with his father because he leaves his hair on his grave; it links him with his sister, as he is prepared to co-operate with her; and finally it is a link with his mother, as she is going to be his victim. Nevertheless, Kitto suggests that Orestes' lock found on his father's tomb serves no practical purpose and that it does not help the plot. He regards it as merely Aischylos' way to portray Electra's inner emotions.[39]

c. The woven garment

The sign of recognition between Electra and Orestes is a garment belonging to Orestes and woven by Electra herself in her childhood. It is obvious that it functions as yet another link between brother and sister, not only because it makes the recognition possible but also because it proves their special bond to each other. However, it also unites the two children indirectly with their parents as it is a reminder of the happy childhood they have spent with them as one united family.

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[39] Kitto, p.81.

2. Sophocles: *Electra*

Electra's urn

The most important motif of the Sophoclean tragedy is the urn which Electra holds believing that it contains the ashes of her dead brother. She is unaware of the fact that it is fake and just a ploy to enable Orestes to enter the palace without raising suspicion. Sophocles uses tragic irony to arouse the audience's sympathy for Electra and also to intensify the recognition scene which is going to follow. This particular episode also reveals the strong but at the same time tender personality of Electra. The woman who is capable of killing her own mother without any inhibitions becomes a vulnerable child when she holds the urn with the ashes of her beloved brother. Thus the urn highlights her tragic fate: a woman with a sensitive, loving nature has been transformed into a ruthless creature seeking revenge. She is unable to hide her pain and her weakness at the thought of her brother's death but she finds the energy to transform them as, still grieving, she makes up her mind to proceed alone to the performance of the deed.

3. Euripides: *Electra*

a.The lock of Orestes' hair

Following the tradition, Euripides makes use in his tragedy of the Aischylean motif, the lock of Orestes' hair found on Agamemnon's grave. However, while in the *Choephoroi* it was an element of reunification, in the Euripidean tragedy it has the opposite function: it delays the recognition and deepens the abyss between brother and sister. Had Electra believed the news of her brother's arrival, recognition would have followed immediately. Instead, she refuses to believe that Orestes is back. When the old servant urges her to compare the sample of hair found on the grave to her own to see if the colour matches, she becomes annoyed and argues that similarity of hair-colour does not necessarily imply blood relationship. She chooses to ignore this proof of her brother's return. Life has made her a realist to whom divine symbols mean nothing.

Orestes' action in leaving a lock of hair on the tomb is not intended to reveal his identity, but is merely his duty to his father's memory. While in the *Choephoroi* the ritual was the means the hero used in order to inform his sister of his arrival, in *Electra* it has no further symbolic function. The fact that Orestes hides almost immediately after visiting his father's grave proves this point, and stresses the avenger's weak character.

b. Orestes' garment

Orestes' garment is another motif which could lead to recognition if interpreted correctly, but which delays it as Electra fails to appreciate its significance. Her realism again defeats her feminine intuition. Electra has accepted her fate, her humiliation and has given up hoping. Even when her potential happiness is near, she refuses to see it.

c. Electra's jug

When she first appears on stage, Electra is carrying a jug of water on her head. This indicates Electra's poverty and humiliation, as it shows that she has to do the housework, like a slave. The motif is also reminiscent of the Sophoclean Electra holding the urn. In both cases the objects state the character of the heroine. The contrast is obvious: The urn indicates a powerful, proud woman who, despite the pain, has not lost her human, sensitive nature. The jug suggests an apathetic creature, aware only of her humiliation and weakness.

4. Hugo von Hofmannsthal: *Elektra*

Elektra's axe

The leitmotif of the axe dominates the play: it is the axe Agamemnon was murdered with, and which Elektra has buried and keeps for his avenger. She mentions it in her first monologue as a link between past and future. She recalls the function it had in Agamemnon's murder: *'da fuhr das Beil hinab und spaltete/ sein Fleisch'* (p.192), and sees it in her vision as the means of revenge: *'die Fackel schwinkt er links und rechts das Beil.'* (p.197); *'wenn das rechte Blutopfer unterm Beile fällt, dann träumst du/ nicht länger.'* (p.204), she tells Klytämnestra who is suffering from nightmares; *'Nein, die dazwischen liegt, die Arbeit,/ die tat das Beil allein.'* (p.206), she says ironically to her mother who refuses to acknowledge her deed; *'Ein Beil! Das Beil! Das Beil womit der Vater - [...] Für den Bruder/ bewahrt ich es. Nun müssen wir es schwingen.'* (p.215), she exclaims while explaining her murderous plan to Chrysothemis. To Orest she reveals her odd attachment to the axe before realizing that he is her brother: *Ich grab was aus: kaum wirst du aus dem Licht sein,/ wo werd' ichs haben und es herzen und/ es küssen, so wie wenns mein lieber Bruder/ und auch mein lieber Sohn in einem wäre.* (p.220) When Orest states his identity, Elektra gives him all the ghastly details of their father's murder, committed with the axe: *'auf das schlug sie mit hochgehobenem Beil/ von oben zu'.* (p.228). Finally, the motif appears in one of the most dramatic scenes of the play: when Orest enters the palace to commit the matricide, Elektra is left by herself outside, and realizes too late that she has forgotten to give her brother the axe: *'Ich habe ihm das Beil nicht geben können!/ Sie sind gegangen, und ich habe ihm/ das Beil nicht geben können. Es sind keine/ Götter im Himmel!'* (p.229)

With the axe, and its direct relation to Elektra, Hofmannsthal portrays her personality. She is unable to forget and spends her life brooding on Agamemnon's

murder: the axe reminds her constantly of the past. She is determined to avenge her father's death: the axe does not let her forget her duty. She is all alone, totally isolated, without any friends to comfort her: her only companion is something she digs out of the earth, the axe which she loves and treasures as if it were alive. Finally, her complete inability to perform a deed is implied by the fact that at the crucial point she forgets to give her brother the axe. The only thing left to her is death.

5. Eugene O'Neill : *Mourning Becomes Electra*

a. The Blessed Isles

In contrast to the severe Mannon residence, symbolizing death and hatred, a place from which all the Mannons wish to escape, O'Neill introduces the motif of the *Blessed Isles*: a beautiful South Sea island, primitive and unspoilt, blissful and full of life, the dream place of all the haunted Mannons. The first person to mention them is Seth, the old housekeeper, who has a vague notion that Adam Brant has been there, which is later verified by Brant himself in his conversation with Lavinia. Even Lavinia, the severe Mannon, expresses intense interest in the islands and follows Adam's description with obvious fascination:

> *Unless you've seen it, you can't picture the green beauty of their land set in the blue of the sea! The clouds like down in the mountain tops, the sun drowsing in your blood, and always the surf on the barrier reef singing a croon in your ears like a lullaby! The Blessed Isles, I'd call them! You can there forget all men's dirty dreams of greed and power!* (p.44)

It is significant that their dominant colour is green, and that green is Christine's favourite colour. (see p.242) It is, therefore, not surprising that Adam later divulges his intention to take Christine to them, a desire later shared by Ezra Mannon: *'I've a notion if we'd leave the children and go off on a voyage together - to the other side of the world - find some islands where we could be alone for a while.'* (p.95) Ezra has come back determined to spend the rest of his life in a peaceful place with Christine. Upon his return from the war Orin describes to his mother the dream he had when he was in a coma after being injured. It corresponds perfectly to the dream already expressed by Adam and Ezra. But in his

dream Orin has gone a step further than just wishing to be there with Christine: he has associated the islands with his mother:

> *There was no one there but you and me. And yet I never saw you, that's the funny part. I only felt you all around me. The breaking of the waves was your voice. The sky was the same colour as your eyes. The warm sun was like your skin. The whole island was you.*(p.148)

All of them have the same vision: escape to the *Blessed Isles* with Christine as their sole companion. Her beauty and sexuality are associated in their minds with the peace of pure, unspoilt islands. Yet, none of them manages to materialize his dream. Even for Orin, who eventually goes to the islands hoping to find the paradise of his dreams not with Christine, but with Lavinia, they prove to be nothing but a sham:

> *But they turned out to be Vinnie's islands, not mine. They only made me sick - and the naked women disgusted me. I guess, I'm too much of a Mannon, after all, to turn into a pagan.* (p.235)

He follows his Mannon destiny like Adam and his father, hoping to find peace and forgiveness in death and hoping to be reunited with Christine: *'Yes! It's the way to peace - to find her again - my lost Island - Death is an Island of Peace, too - Mother will be waiting for me there.'* (p.270)

The only Mannon who seems to benefit from the Islands is Lavinia. They made her aware of what she refused to see all these years: the fact that she is Christine's daughter. She possesses the same kind of vitality, but it was hidden under her Mannon mask. (On the motif of mask see pp.266-70.) On her return from the journey she attributes the miracle of her transformation, her liberation to the islands:

> *I loved those Islands. They finished setting me free. There was something there mysterious and beautiful - a good spirit - of love - coming out of the land and sea. It made me forget death. There was no hereafter. There was only this world* - (p.238).

But Lavinia realizes too late where she truly belongs. Even for Lavinia the Mannon destiny proves too strong.

b. Masks

Masks were an important feature for O'Neill as he himself admitted on numerous occasions, and as is implied by the fact that he made use of masks or mask-like faces in a number of plays. Kenneth McGowan, who worked closely with him as a director in the first years of his career, states that they shared the same interest:

> I have always associated Eugene O'Neill with my interest in masks. The first production we made when we joined with Robert Edmond Jones in re-opening the Provincetown Playhouse late in 1923 thrust masks into Strindberg's *The Spook Sonata.*[40]

In the same interview he makes a gives a history of the function of masks from antiquity until today, within and outside the theatre. He refers to the belief of some ancient tribes that masks could establish communication with the gods, and justifies the necessity of the use of masks in drama, which he believes set the actors free: 'When a man puts on a mask he experiences a kind of release from his inhibited and bashful and circumscribed soul. He can say and do terrible things and he likes it.' This is not the only indication of O'Neill's acute interest in masks. Eugene M. Waith in his paper 'Eugene O'Neill: An

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[40] Kenneth McGowan, McGowan's Masks', in: *New York Times*, 4, April, 1943.

exercise in Unmasking', maintains that he used masks in his plays mainly in order 'to bring out some relationship between the individual and society or between the individual and the supernatural, and thus to give the characters "a significance beyond themselves".'[41]

However, the most important statement on his ideas about masks is made by O'Neill himself in his own long notes. Here he speaks of his certainty that modern playwrights will re-discover the use of masks as an expressive means, as he believes that they are the most accurate method for a dramatist to present the profound hidden conflicts of the conscious and unconscious mind, of inner drama. He also refers to a more practical reason for the use of masks:

> Looked at from even the most practical stand-point of the practising playwright, the mask is dramatic in itself, has always been dramatic in itself, is a proven weapon of attack. At its best, it is more subtly, imaginatively, suggestively dramatic than any actor's face can ever be. Let anyone who doubts this study Japanese Nó masks, or Chinese theatre masks, or African primitive masks - or right here in America Bendàs masks, or even photographs of them.[42]

He also talks about them in connection with *Mourning Becomes Electra*, where he initially intended to use masks:

> With *Mourning Becomes Electra*, masks were called for in one draft of the plays. But the Classical connotation was too insistent. Masks in that

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[41] Eugene M. Waith, 'Eugene O'Neill: An Exercise in Unmasking', *Educational Theatre Journal*, 13 (1960), p.184.
[42] Eugene O'Neill's typewritten notes concerning masks are held at Yale University.

> connection demand great language to speak - which let me out of it with a sickening bump! So I had to discard them.[43]

He further argues that the New England setting (he had selected as his scenic background) would not allow 'great language even in a dramatist capable of writing it', so the motif evolved ultimately into the mask-like faces of the characters, an indication that his intention was tempered by the circumstances. However, he expresses his wish to see *Mourning Becomes Electra* performed entirely with masks. He believes, that 'masks would emphasize the drama of the life and death impulses which drive the characters on to their fates and put more in its proper secondary place, as a frame, the story of the New England family.'

Finally, O'Neill seems to have been so preoccupied with masks that they followed him into his own personal life as well, as the following comment by his friend Russell Crouse implies:

> O'Neill is one of the most charming men I know, and I've known him for twenty-five years, but I can't say I understand him. His face is a mask. I don't know what goes on behind it, and I don't think anyone else does.[44]

The mask-like faces in *Mourning Becomes Electra* have the same symbolic function as the white portico hiding the stern Mannon residence behind it, and the darkness of the setting (see page 241). All Mannons seem to have something to hide. Under her austere mask Lavinia hides the vivacious nature she has inherited from her mother. Her expressionless mask-like face conceals her true emotions, until she herself discards it during her stay on the Islands.

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[43] From O'Neill's Notes on masks.
[44] 'Profiler', *The New Yorker*, 13, March, 1948.

Christine hides her hatred for her husband and her passion for Adam under the mask which living with the Mannons has imposed on her. Her odd expression is noticed by the simple townspeople the first time she appears; without knowing it, they reveal the whole truth:

> *Secret lookin' - 's if it was a mask she'd put on. That's the Mannon look. They all has it. They grow it on their wifes. Seth's growed it on too, didn't you notice - from bein' with 'em all his life. They don't want folks to guess their secrets.* (p.21)

Evidently, Seth has developed the same concealing technique in order to safeguard the Mannon secrets.

The most characteristic Mannon element to betray Adam Brant's identity is his mask-like expression. Like the rest of them, he also has to hide his love for Christine and his feeling of hatred for his father and Ezra whom he holds responsible for the death of his beloved mother.

The first image we have of Ezra Mannon is the portrait in his study, which depicts his characteristic mask-like face. Ezra's passionate love and desire for his wife contravenes his Mannon conservatism and has to be kept secret. The cold, lifeless expression has eventually become his nature, and is therefore more pronounced in him than in the others.

Finally Orin, despite being away from home for a long time, maintains his familiar mask-like expression, as he also has a secret to protect: his unnatural love for his mother, which is linked to his hatred for his father and his mad jealousy when he finds out about his mother's love affair. Even the portraits of the dead Mannons have the same expression, keeping their own secrets. All the characters keep their secret not only from the others, but also from their own selves, as if they had masks not only on their faces but

also on their souls: Lavinia refuses to see her bond with her mother, Christine hides for years her disgust for Ezra, Ezra does not accept his attachment to Christine, Adam denies his Mannon identity, Orin fails to see that his love for Christine is perverted. As O'Neill stated in what he called his 'Dogma for the new masked drama', 'One's outer life passes in a solitude haunted by the masks of others; one's inner life passes in a solitude hounded by the masks of oneself.'[45]

c. Hair

The three main female characters of the trilogy, Lavinia, Christine and Marie Brantôme all possess a characteristic in common; their hair:

> *She [Christine] wears a green satin dress, [...] which brings out the peculiar colour of her thick, curly hair, partly a copper brown, partly a bronze gold, each shade distinct and yet blending with the other.* (p.20)

In his conversation with Lavinia Adam notices that her hair is identical not only to her mother's, but to his own mother's as well:

> *And look at your hair. You won't meet hair like yours and hers again in a month of Sundays. I only know of one other woman who had it. You'll think it strange when I tell you. It was my mother. [...] Yes, she had beautiful hair like your mother's, that hung down to her knees...* (p.42)

The astonishing resemblance between the three women is not coincidental and has a similar function to the masks, as O'Neill notes in his *Working Notes and Extracts from a Fragmentary Work Diary*:

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[45] From O'Neill's Notes on masks.

> [...] peculiar gold-brown hair exactly alike in Lavinia and her mother - same as hair of the dead woman, Adam's mother, whom Ezra's father and uncle had loved - who started the chain of recurrent love and hatred and revenge - emphasize this motivating fate out of past - hair of women another recurrent motive - strange, hidden psychic identity of Christine with the dead woman and of Lavinia (in spite of her father-Mannon imitative mannerisms) with her mother -[46]

All three women attract men in a very extraordinary way, which, far from being merely a sexual desire, is something more profound, almost sacred. For all the male Mannons, Marie, Christine and Lavinia are not three different women, but rather three different expressions of the Woman whom they all worship in the hope that they will be saved with the help of her power. In their attempt to possess 'her', the male Mannons kill each other and drive the objects of their desire to death. Marie Brantôme was the apple of discord between Abe Mannon and his brother David. Her choice of David initiated the chain of hatred which haunted the next two Mannon generations. Adam Brant's reaction when he first met Christine was anger and a desire to steal her from Ezra and thereby avenge his mother's death. The man who deprived him of the woman he most loved, his mother, has to be punished by losing his wife. The same jealousy and urge for revenge forced Orin to kill Adam Brant, who dared take his mother away from him, and to warn Lavinia not to try to leave him and marry Peter, as, after Christine's death, Lavinia has taken his mother's place. In his insanity Orin can clearly see the link between Marie, Christine and Lavinia: *'There are times now when you don't seem to be my sister, nor Mother, but some stranger with the same beautiful hair. [...] Perhaps you're Marie Brantôme, eh?'* (p. 268) In his desperate endeavour not to lose Lavinia, his last hope of salvation, he makes an

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[46] O'Neill, 'Working Notes'.

incestuous proposal to her, in order to tie her in guilt. However, his attempt is bound to fail. All the Mannons, although they realize the redemptive power the women possess, cannot help destroying it by sending them to their death: David and Ezra refused to help Marie when she was dying, Orin, by killing Adam, urged his mother to commit suicide and Adam's ghost drove Lavinia to self-condemnation. They cannot find the *Blessed Isles*, as they have themselves cut their link to them.

d. The sea-shanty 'Shenandoah'

One of the most important symbolic leitmotifs of the trilogy is the sea-shanty 'Shenandoah', sung by Seth and by an old sailor in the scene preceding the one on Adam Brant's ship:

Oh, Shenandoah, I long to hear you -
A-way, my rolling river!
Oh, Shenandoah, I can't get near you -
Way-ay, I'm bound away
Across the wide Missouri!

In these few rhyming verses of the traditional sea-shanty is enclosed the Mannon destiny : they all yearn for a place which is far away: 'Shenandoah' is another version of the motif of the *Blessed Isles*. Nevertheless, they are all destined to go somewhere else, and unable to change the route of their journey, as Lavinia's words indicate: *'I'm not bound away - not now, Seth! I'm bound here - to the Mannon dead!'* (p.287)

Of great significance appears to be the lack of symmetry between the antithetic leitmotifs of the trilogy. 'Shenandoah', the *Blessed Isles*, the sea, Adam's ship, the Woman with the peculiar hair, the colour green signify the strong will of the Mannons to escape from death and hatred, their yearning for love and life. All these motifs are used versus

the one and only symbol of death and hatred: the Mannon house. In the presence of the house all other motifs fade away: death is always stronger, despite the fact that life may find multiple ways of expression.

6. Gerhart Hauptmann: *Elektra*

The axe

Following Hofmannsthal's example, Gerhart Hauptmann also introduces in his play the axe, the murderous weapon used at Agamemnon's assassination and kept by Elektra for the act of vengeance. For each character in the play the axe has a different meaning. Elektra claims that she was entrusted with it by the Moirai and, therefore, it is her responsibility to keep it until the avenger returns. Like her counterpart in Hofmannsthal's play, she feels the axe is the only thing that justifies her existence and gives meaning to her life. However, it is not a symbol of her incapability to perform a deed, as was the case in Hofmannstahl's *Elektra.* On the contrary, she does indeed execute her duty by handing the axe to Orest.

For Orest accepting the axe is connected with the realization that he is expected to avenge his father's murder:

> *In meine Hand geschmiedet ist ein Beil:*
> *wer mir die Hand, den Arm befreien will,*
> *der muß den Arm mir von der Schulter schlagen*
> *und dann selbst tut das Mordbeil seine Pflicht*
> *so sicher tötend wie der Blitz des Zeus.* (p.169)

Nevertheless, he is asked to perform the deed against his will: he does not feel the urge to kill his mother, but is yearning to be reunited with her in love. Thus Hauptmann's Orest stands closer to the Aischylean hero than to his brave counterpart in Hofmannsthal's version. Like Orestes in the *Choephoroi*, he is forced to commit the matricide but appreciates at the same time the sacrifice he is making. Together with his mother he is killing his innocence, his youth. The axe he uses is double-edged: it kills the victim and

destroys the murderer. After committing the murder as if in a trance, he returns the axe to Elektra, who appears not to recognize it any longer: *'Elektra hält das Beil wie etwas Fremdes in der Hand.'* (p.178) After the deed has been executed, the axe has lost its meaning. Elektra's orders were to deliver the axe to her brother, Orest's orders were to kill. Like the axe both of them have fulfilled their task.

As in almost all adaptations of the myth, Pylades is the devoted friend, escorting and helping Orest.[47] He does not hesitate to share the curse and guilt of his friend: he is prepared to take the axe in his hands and, if necessary, to kill with it. The axe is for him an element that chains him to Orest, and converts him into his blood-brother. He keeps it in his own hands, as a proof of his loyalty, and hands it to Orest, when it is time for him to act.

For Klytämnestra the axe symbolizes the hateful past she has managed to erase from her memory. Even when she sees it, she is unable to recognize. However, Elektra is determined to make her mother remember, and acknowledge her crime:

> *ELEKTRA: (bricht in ein furchtbares Lachen aus, hält ihrer Mutter das Beil dicht unter den Augen).*
> *Was ist das schwarze, das geronnene Blut*
> *an diesem Beil?* (p.172)

Even when she is forced to admit her deed, hoping that this might save her life, she insists that using the axe was an act of justice: *'Gerichtet hab' ich mit diesem Beil.'* (p.172) However, this does not mean that she will escape punishment. Using her own weapon against her, her son avenges the murder she committed.

Finally, Aigisth handles the axe in order to indicate his attachment and loyalty to Klytämnestra. He helped her kill her husband in the past; now he tries his best to protect

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[47] In Hofmannsthal's *Elektra* the character of Pylades is missing.

her by tearing the axe away from Pylades: *'Mir her das Beil!'* (p.170). However, he cannot escape his destiny. Pylades pierces him with his sword; Klytämnestra is left in the hands of Aigisth's and her enemies.

CONCLUSIONS

One of the focal points of this study has been the attempt to show that all six writers attached considerable importance to the scenic elements of their plays. Even the three Greek dramatists, although it was unconventional at the time to give stage-directions, indirectly described their stage-setting by interweaving images of scenery in the poetic text. In the course of the analysis of the Greek plays it became apparent that the ancient tragedies were not an attempt on the dramatists' part to reconstruct the past in a spirit of historical accuracy, but that the legendary story was cast in contemporary guise. From this realization emerged my main aim: to shed light on the ways in which the choice of scenic background is connected with the cultural and social background of the plays and not least with personal beliefs and biographical details of the dramatists.

In Aischylos' *Choephoroi* the function of the tomb as dramatic symbol and as scenic device has been discussed. It points directly to the world of the dead and chthonian deities and thus calls to mind the Eleusinian Mysteries and the dramatist's own probable involvement in the Mysteries. Furthermore, Electra's and Orestes' long prayer by their father's grave not only suggests that its composer was a religious person himself but also that the audience were in a position to appreciate the significance of such a scene and feel sympathy for the protagonists. The religious character of the era is communicated to us through the scenic presentation. In a similar way the evocation of darkness which creates a mystical spiritual atmosphere is something that the initiates of the Eleusinian Mysteries would have been familiar with.

As already mentioned on page 248, a parallel can be drawn between the party of mourners in the beginning of the play and the Erinyes at the end. The motif of the Erinyes can also be examined in connection with the religious character of the era. It is obvious that the deities referred to and worshipped in the play are archaic, primitive. From this we

can deduce that, in Aischylos' time, the twelve Olympian gods were not yet established as the main divinities. In addition, although his society was already patriarchal, some strong elements of matriarchy had remained[1]; such elements cannot be observed in Sophocles' later treatment of the subject.

Finally, all the object-motifs of the tragedy (discussed on pp. 257-76) owe their existence to certain well-known traditions of the time. For example, leaving a lock of hair was one of the most usual ways for children to honour their dead parents, a motif employed by all three Greek tragedians. In his book *The Greek Way of Death* Robert Garland notes that the omission of that deed 'by a son, or adopted son and heir was a matter of such gravity that this circumstance might be adduced as evidence in a case of disputed inheritance to prove that the claimant had no genuine kinship with the deceased.'[2]

In addition, it appears that the use of non-verbal means of communication, exploited by the three modern writers in their adaptations of the theme, was present in the ancient Greek dramatists. Orestes' act notifies the audience of certain aspects of his personality: he honours his father and is prepared to avenge his murder. Similarly, Electra's weaving a garment for her brother, apart from showing her affection for him, also indicates her higher status in Greek society. Weaving was an activity exercised mostly by women of the most prominent social class, who were not obliged to do the housework and therefore had spare time.[3]

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[1] This can be particularly observed in the image of the black-robed women and more importantly in Orestes' reluctance to commit matricide.

[2] Robert Garland, *The Greek Way of Death* (London: Duckworth, 1985), p.104.

[3] In her study Gillian Clark mentions that 'it [fabric-making] also kept women occupied when they had slaves to do the domestic work.'See Gillian Clark, *Women in the Ancient World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p.12

It is evident that Aischylos, took the scenic elements of his tragedy either from the contemporary world of Athens or his personal beliefs and in doing so brought his play close to his audience.

One of the first things one notices in Sophocles' *Electra* is the omission of the scene at the tomb. This scenic modification suggests that in Sophocles' tragedy the re-establishment of the disturbed social order is more crucial than the revenge as an act of honour. It also manifests the radical change which took place at the time in theological matters. The tomb of the dead father is not of such vital importance; the chthonian deities are not asked to offer their assistance; their power is questioned. Like Aischylos, who must have been influenced in composing the first scene both by his own religious upbringing and by the general beliefs of his era, Sophocles almost certainly removed the motif because it would have little significance in his time and it would communicate the wrong idea to his audience. For the enlightened Athenians of the time had only faith in themselves and would have found it impossible to sympathize with characters who seek divine protection.

It may appear odd that Sophocles presented a luminous play at a time of destruction and decay. As it has already been suggested, in doing so, he probably wished to express his hope for the future of Athens. However, his choice of lighting (given indirectly in the spoken text), in contrast to the one favoured by Aischylos in the *Choephoroi*, can also be attributed to another reason, similar to the one which explains the omission of the tomb. With the shattering of the mythological-theological tradition, the darkness of mysticism was replaced by enlightenment and clarity. Both Socrates and the Sophists focused their attention on the exercise of the human mind which would enable people to see things more clearly and find a logical explanation for all mysteries. Bearing this in mind, Sophocles' conscious use of elements of natural lighting such as the sun and starlight becomes understandable.

Little mention is made of the characters' clothes. Yet we are indirectly informed that Electra is dressed in old dirty rags. In contrast to Aischylos, Sophocles makes no special effort to indicate the heroine's royal origin. As already discussed, Electra's weaving in the *Choephoroi* is characteristic of her status; although she appears dressed in mourning, there is no evidence that her clothes are old or torn. In Sophocles' tragedy Electra's superiority is not stated through external elements. Her noble ancestry is of little significance, for although Chrysothemis is of the same descent and lavishly dressed, her personality resembles that of a slave. It is Electra's strong character which gives her nobility. With the rise of democracy in the second half of the fifth century B.C. oligarchy and aristocracy gradually lost their meaning and value. Simple people had the power to vote and to speak their mind freely. If a citizen was found harmful for the city, he would be ostracized despite his possible aristocratic birth, as for example happened in Cimon's case. (see p.14) Sophocles, who was certainly in favour of the new order, probably regarded Electra's royal descent an irrelevant triviality and did therefore not stress it as Aischylos did.

This point can also be supported by the fact that the most prominent symbolic motif is Electra's urn. There are no signs of higher social status, or claims to the throne. The only object employed by the dramatist is the one that proves Electra's love and devotion to her brother. Yet again, this fits the contemporary Athenian scene, as it was common in Sophocles' time (and not in that of Aischylos) for dead bodies to be cremated and their ashes to be kept in urns.[4] This archaeological detail may explain why in Aischylos' play more importance is attached to Agamemnon's grave, whereas in Sophocles' *Electra* the urn is a far more prominent motif.

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[4] In their book Kurtz and Boardman mention: 'Cremations are more numerous than they had been in the preceding period and there is now a greater variety in the types of ash urn.' See Donna C.Kurtz and John Boardman, *Greek Burial Customs* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971), p.90

We made conclude that the developments in various fields of social life (everyday life, theological issues, political and philosophical concepts, burial customs) can be discerned in the change of the scenic presentation of the tragedies.

As has already been mentioned, the general disorientation which first became noticeable immediately after the end of the Golden Years of the Athenian hegemony came to its peak in the form of decadence with the Peloponnesean War and its destructive repercussions. The already shattered faith in the Olympian gods became utterly insufficient; furthermore the substitute Sophocles' contemporaries had invented for themselves, the faith in their own power, was gradually losing conviction. The people of the time were left puzzled with nothing to support them in their attempt to recover from the war. The scenic background of Euripides' *Electra* clearly conveys the hopelessness and decay characteristic of the time. Electra's dwelling, her poor cottage which is the emblem of her humiliation, is the symbolic presentation of the contemporary Athenian situation.

In the *Choephoroi* Electra's royal ancestry was highlighted whereas in Sophocles' tragedy it was of no particular importance. By contrast, Euripides uses it as a way to emphasize his heroine's pitiful circumstances. She has no spare time to occupy herself with weaving, as she is obliged to do all the domestic work. Her noble descent is regarded almost as a burden as it prevents her from enjoying the simple joys of everyday life. At this point the Athenian spectators might have been reminded of their own glorious past and sympathized with Electra's misery. The darkness both Electra and Orestes seem to prefer as the appropriate hiding place for their shame and fear is almost certainly an element borrowed from Euripides' painful actuality.

In contrast to both Aischylos and Sophocles, who devote meagre attention to the clothes of the protagonists, Euripides underlines their importance. Electra laments her poor dress and expresses her reluctance to go to the festival in the honour of the goddess

Hera because of the impropriety of her clothing. On this point Gillian Clark notes that 'fine clothes were important to a woman's status. A Greek woman was ashamed if she could not dress up for the festival.'[5] The reason for this addition of Euripides becomes evident: Aischylos' heroine was supported by her solid religious faith, her Sophoclean counterpart had her inner strength. However, at the time when Euripides composed his *Electra*, these principles were no longer in existence and the peoples' disgrace was one of the things they were acutely aware of. This was externalized in every possible form, even in something as vain as looks.

The ethical decay is made clear by the fact that Electra is driven to matricide mainly out of jealousy caused by her mother's beautiful clothes. In their shattered *Weltanschauung*, the Athenians of the late fifth century, instead of trying to improve their situation, directed their ill feelings towards those they regarded responsible for it, Alcibiades in particular.

It may thus be seen that all the scenic elements of the play are rooted in this sense of ethical and cultural decline: the humble cottage, the hiding in the darkness, the clothes, the mockery of the objects which lead to the recognition between Electra and Orestes in the *Choephoroi*, all can only be explained in relation to the decadence of Athens at the time the tragedy was first staged.

In Hofmannsthal's *Elektra* the relation between some of the writer's own concepts and the scenic presentation is even more clearly discernible as he did not treat it as just another dramatic device but rather as a solution to the problem of the expressive inadequacy of language. In addition, all the influential factors in Hofmannsthal's work (discussed in Part I) are manifested in the play through the stage-setting. Hofmannsthal's knowledge of Greek drama and his keen interest in it indicate that his decision to present an externally 'non-Greek' version of the Electra-myth was conscious. His direct source

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[5] G. Clark, p.13.

was Greek tragic art and not Goethe's or Grillparzer's adaptations of Greek themes, his one-act tragedy represents what he considered to be ancient Greek spirit, archaic, not 'classical'.

In a strange way his stage-setting, although profoundly different from the standard one of the Greek plays, also bears similarities to it. It is characterized by the same simplicity and plainness which enables the spectators to focus their attention on the characters without being distracted by an extravagant scenic background. Although the play takes place in a dark back-yard, the building behind it is a palace and is therefore reminiscent of the conventional ancient Greek setting. Even the clothes of the characters, although not typical ancient Greek ones, are certainly not the ones in vogue at Hofmannsthal's time and bear some distinct Oriental elements. The motif of darkness strongly emphasized in Hofmannsthal's play, although opposed to the lighting in Sophocles' tragedy (the example which Hofmannsthal declared to have followed) is based on the same idea: to communicate to the audience central aspects of the characters' personalities and situation. In the same way that Sophocles utilized the imagery of light in order to underline the strength and faith of his characters, Hofmannsthal employed darkness in order to reveal disturbed states of mind and to suggest that time stands still. Aware of the meaning Sophocles attached to light in his tragedy, he made use of exactly the same technique in the only episode of the play associated with hope for a better future: Orest appears in a cloud of natural light. Even the contrast between natural and artificial light (accompanying Klytämnestra's first appearance) has its roots in ancient drama, as only the light of the sun was treated as a symbol of hope and healthy life. Finally, as has already been mentioned, Elektra's ritualistic dance at the end recalls the Dionysian ceremonies and hence the origin of Greek drama.

However, as Hofmannsthal was influenced by far more sources than just Greek thought and art, the stage-setting and the scenic elements he uses are better seen as a

blend of these different impulses. For instance, the strong influence of Nietzsche can be ssen in the heroine's final Dionysian dance.

Similarly, the choice of the chromatic leitmotifs, both verbal and visual (e.g. the colour of the clothes) is not only indicative of Hofmannsthal's familiarity with the Symbolistic tradition but more importantly conveys his interest in Freud's theories. Klytämnestra, in her endeavour to disguise her fear appears dressed in red, which only manages to make her state of mind even clearer. This image may call to mind the desperate attempt of Freud's and Breuer's patients to suppress, hide and ultimately delete from their memory a traumatic fact of their lives, which nevertheless always managed to emerge to the surface.

It becomes evident that Hofmannsthal, who wrote his play more than two thousand years after the Greek tragedians and was naturally influenced by entirely different social and cultural factors, faithfully followed their example in 'stating' his sources of influence either directly or indirectly in his play's scenic presentation.

Eugene O'Neill himself declared that he was influenced by many different factors. We can also be certain that he paid great attention to the scenic presentation of his plays; this is supported by his own notes. The undeniable influence Greek dramaturgy had on him is evident in his interviews and personal letters and can be clearly observed in most of his plays, *Mourning Becomes Electra* among them. Its stage-setting, with a building like a Greek temple in the background, is the most obvious scenic similarity between O'Neill's treatment of the theme and the Greek tragedies. Moreover, as O'Neill himself hinted, Aischylos' *Oresteia* served as his model-play: the darkness in *Mourning Becomes Electra* apart from having a symbolic function, can also be regarded as a reminiscence of it.

As O'Neill's trilogy is externally not Greek (unlike Hofmannsthal's and Hauptmann's plays), the clothes of the characters could not be ancient Greek ones.

However, the image of the women in black who appear at the beginning and end of the *Choephoroi* has its counterpart in the character of Lavinia, who appears dressed in black at the beginning and the end of *Mourning Becomes Electra.* In addition, the fact that Lavinia becomes her own guilty conscience in the last scene of the play hints at her relationship to the black-robed Furies at the end of the *Choephoroi.* [6]

Apart from the temple-like house, the mask-like faces of all the Mannons are probably the most prominent Greek scenic element in the trilogy and their importance is emphasized in the writer's own notes. (see pp.266-70).

The Mannon women's common characteristic of strangely beautiful hair is symbolically used to accentuate the role of Marie, Christine and Lavinia as the deified Woman, and suggests the archaic cult of Mother Earth. Moreover, it is strange and perhaps significant that O'Neill chose this particular feature as the external link between the three women, as the beauty of their hair was one of the things ancient Greek women were most concerned about. We may recall that Hofmannsthal's Elektra also considered her hair to be one of the main characteristics of her lost feminine beauty and lamented the fact that she had had to sacrifice it. This analogy may indicate a diachronic tendency to associate long hair with an almost sacred femininity. Even the sea-shanty 'Shenandoah' may point to a certain Greek influence as the sea was traditionally associated with the desire to escape.

The *Blessed Isles*, a recurrent motif in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, which is also associated with Death, calls to mind the 'Elysium or the Isles of the Blest, situated at the ends of the earth [...] as the place to which certain favoured heroes, exempted from death, are translated by the gods.'[7] The *Blessed Isles* was also something O'Neill himself was seeking and never found in his life, and the mask-like face was a characteristic his friends

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[6] The image of the black-dressed woman had its model in O'Neill's mother. See page 184 above.

[7] *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* ed. by M. Cary, J.D. Denniston, J. Wight Duff, A.D. Nock, W.D.Ross, H.H. Sculland and others (Oxford: Clarendon, 1949), p.19.

could discern on him. His passion for the sea and the sailor's life is hidden behind the motif of 'Shenandoah'.

Here, as in Hofmansthal's *Elektra*, the choice of the scenic elements cannot be attributed to a sole influence: Nietzsche's influence is discernible in the motif of the *Blessed Isles*, and there are traces of Freudian influence in the selection of clothes. In the same way that Freud's patients kept secret the sexual cause of their hysteria, Lavinia tries to conceal her sexuality by wearing plain, black dresses. By contrast, her mother, who has no inhibitions about showing her attractiveness, wears provocative green dresses (the colour green is treated by O'Neill as a symbolic depiction of paganism), a colour later Lavinia also favours. For its part, Strindberg's strong influence on O'Neill can also be detected in the scenic presentation in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, in such elements as the house of death and the motif of the sea.

Certain biographical details also had an impact on the setting of the trilogy. First of all, houses looking like Greek temples were to be seen in New England O'Neill knew. In addition, the trilogy contains autobiographical elements such as the darkness which may have connections with O'Neill's 'dark' life and existence. It is evident that like Hofmannsthal, O'Neill followed the tradition of 'stating' his sources and influences through the scenery; indeed in his case this tendency appears to be more conscious than the Austrian's.

The main element of the stage-setting in Hauptmann's *Elektra*, the deserted temple of the goddess Demeter, may be regarded as the most apparent similarity between the play and the ancient Greek tragedies, but at the same time it may also be regarded as Hauptmann's most significant deviation from the Greek plays. He seems to follow the general tradition of setting a tragedy before a temple or a palace, but departs from the conventional scenic presentation of the Electra-myth by setting his play in a temple. In this sense his *Elektra* bears a similarity only to O'Neill's trilogy, as *Mourning Becomes*

Electra is set before a temple-like house. This indicates that the two writers concerned with the religious quality of theatre. They both clearly appreciated the connection between theatre and religion which existed in ancient Greece, and wished to see it re-established in modern playwriting and staging. Thus, their choice not only of an ancient theme but of a temple-like scenic background can be interpreted as their attempt to familiarize their audience with these ideas. However, this is not the only concept the two playwrights had in common. The ancient belief in Fate, most accentuated in the *Choephoroi*, is one of the focal points for both Hauptmann and O'Neill. In Hauptmann's play it has to be regarded in connection with his fascination with archaic primitive Greece, which also finds expression in the recurrent motif of the chthonian deities.

There is evidence that Hauptmann and O'Neill met when Hauptmann was in the United States, and that Hauptmann saw and made enthusiastic comments on the first stage-production of *Mourning Becomes Electra*. In the *New York World-Telegram* of 16 March 1932 the meeting between the two writers is related as follows:

> The leading dramatists of their respective countries met last night when Gerhart Hauptmann and Eugene O'Neill and their wives were tendered a dinner by the board of directors of the Theatre Guild.[8]

Although there is no direct evidence, it is possible that the two writers exchanged views on Greek drama, as O'Neill had just completed his trilogy, and Hauptmann's mind was always preoccupied with the Greek spirit.

However, even if Hauptmann expressed an interest in treating dramatically the same myth as O'Neill, he could not have foreseen the tragic historical events which were to follow and to have such a profound influence on him both as an individual and as a playwright. The Second World War and Germany's destruction definitely left their traces

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[8] *New York World-Telegram*, 16 March 1932.

on Hauptmann's *Atriden-Tetralogie*. As already mentioned, the destroyed, deserted temple can be considered as a symbolic depiction of Germany at the time; the horrifying darkness may be regarded as the visual presentation of the disillusion and agony of a man who deeply loves his country and sees it in ashes. And yet, the pallid sun-ray that lightens up the scenery at the end of *Elektra* is a sign of optimism and hope. At this point it is interesting to observe the similarity to Sophocles' *Electra*. Both dramatists feel a deep affection towards their countries and pain for the destruction caused by a war, but both are still capable of feeling hope. Despite the two thousand years between them, they express their optimism in the same way: with the scenic means of light.

It should now be evident that all these six different dramatists, writing at different times, were influenced by many different external factors and used the scenic presentation of their plays in order to display their personal beliefs and feelings and to make their plays more easily approachable to their audience. The comparative analysis also revealed that a distinct analogy can be discerned in the scenic elements employed by the playwrights. They all attached substantial importance to the function of stage-setting and lighting - stated also indirectly in the spoken text -; moreover, the lighting in particular was identical in all plays save the Sophoclean *Electra*, which may be attributed to that dramatist's personal wish and endeavour to establish with his tragedy an optimistic atmosphere amongst his fellow-citizens.

In addition, the fact that the expressive function of secondary scenic elements such as clothes and objects was also exploited by all writers confirms that the dramatists were not only concerned with the written text of their plays; they saw the elements of scenery as equally important dramatic components.

The most interesting finding, however, was that the historical and ideological background exercised a direct influence on the playwright's use of visual elements as

indicated by the dramatists in a number of ways, not only in the explicit stage-directions but also through pointers in the text itself.

Finally, as the core of this study has been the dramatisation of the Electra-myth and the fascinating personality of the heroine, nothing probably could be more effective as a conclusion than the following letter written to Hofmannsthal by Gertrud Eysoldt, the actress who acted the role of Elektra in the first production of his play:

> Heut Nacht habe ich die Elektra mit nach Hause genommen und eben gelesen. Ich liege zerbrochen davon - ich leide - ich leide - ich schreie auf unter dieser Gewaltthätigkeit - ich fürchte mich vor meinen eigenen Kräften - vor dieser Qual, die auf mich wartet. Ich werde furchtbar leiden dabei. Ich habe das Gefühl, dass ich sie nur einmal spielen kann. Mir selbst möchte ich entfliehen. Sie haben nun ein paar Monate mit meinem brennenden Leben geschrieben, Sie haben aus meinem Blut alle Möglichkeiten wilder Träume geformt - und ich habe hier ahnungslos gelebt und an Sie nur in heiteren buntfarbigen Stunden gedacht - sorglos gewartet auf das Ereignis, das Sie mir bringen würden [...] ein Ausruhen von tausend Leiden vergangener Jahre. Und Sie haben inzwischen fern von mir alle wilden Schmerzen jener einstigen Zeiten - alle Empörungen, die meinen schwachen Körper je geschüttelt haben - all dies *unendlich brünstige* Wollen meines Blutes sich zu Gaste geladen und schicken es mir nun zu. Ich erkenne alles wieder - ich bin so furchtbar erschrocken - ich entsetze mich. Ich wehre mich - ich fürchte mich.[9]

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[9] Undated and unpublished letter Gertrud Eysoldt's to Hugo von Hofmannsthal, as quoted in Wolfgang Nehring, 'Elektra und Ödipus. Hofmsnnsthals Erneuerung der Antike für das Theater Max Reihardts', pp.123-42, p.130.

Eysoldt's words remind us that there is more to a play than its text, but that the text itself suggests very firmly, to the trained eye at least, these dramatic dimensions of which scenic presentation is a not unimportant part.

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